



September 11, 2001 as a Cultural Trauma

A Case Study through Popular Culture

Christine Muller



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Christine Muller
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut, USA

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*In memory of the victims of September 11 and in solidarity with those who
feel their loss.*

*There are many ways to understand the story of Pandora's Box. It is said
that a proper translation construes what was left after horror and evil
escaped into the world as "expectation." If so, then one awaits whatever
comes next, for better or for worse. But the character of expectation is not
prescribed. It is up to us to choose—to lose ourselves against the worst or to
remain, for the better, with hope.*

PROLOGUE: THE CASE OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

For those living on the East Coast of the United States, the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, featured mild weather and a clear blue sky. Mayoral primary elections slightly disrupted business as usual for New York City, drawing local news coverage. National media stories that had inundated the now-fading summer—shark attacks and the scandal of the missing Washington intern Chandra Levy, the apparent lover of married Congressman Gary Condit—lingered in the common stream of current events.

At 8:46 a.m., while morning talk shows offered weather forecasts and headline overviews of world politics, something interrupted the ordinary schedule. This “something” was abrupt, confusing, and destructive, and depending on where you were at the time, it seemed to be different things. If you were in the North Tower of the World Trade Center, between the ninety-third and the ninety-ninth floors, you might never have known what had happened. If you were above or below those floors and without a view outside, you felt the building shake, sway sharply, and right itself and might have wondered if a gas line or bomb had exploded somewhere. In a place as remote as the shopping concourse at the tower’s base, you would have seen a fireball suddenly and inexplicably burst from the elevators. If you were in the South Tower, you might have started to leave your desk after hearing and feeling the mysterious collision next door, until a public announcement reassured everyone that their building was safe and the workday could continue. At the North Tower’s top, fires erupted, smoke spread, and burst pipes threw water throughout the offices and down the stairwells. If you had a view from outside the building, you

might have seen a passenger jet race into its façade and watched in horror as a multi-floor gash in that façade gaped open with debris and office workers perched along its edges, surrounded by showers of paper flurrying in the exposed air. You might also have begun to see some of those office workers, who were crowding away from the heat for a cool breath outside, falling or—to avoid death by smoke and fire—jumping to their deaths on the distant streets below. In fact, later estimates suggested that as many as one in every six of the dead from the North Tower died by jumping (Junod 2003, 180).

On television and radio, journalists with breaking news expressed initial concern that possibly a small plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Cautious speculation about how such an accident could occur and research into precedents for such a calamity would pepper the coverage until 9:03 a.m. At that moment, while network news cameras broadcast live images of the first tower burning, a second plane swiftly burst into sight, only to disappear into the South Tower, with a churning ball of flames rolling out of the building's opposite side confirming that impact had occurred. Stunned journalists covering the unfolding events now began to speak of an intentional act, of terrorism, talk that would eventually crystallize around the name Osama bin Laden and his violently extremist global network, Al-Qaeda.

In New York City, both on- and off-duty rescue workers, from city and Port Authority police officers to firefighters and paramedics, were scrambling to the two towers as their occupants slowly made their way down as many as ninety-one floors. Survivors would later recount their gratitude for the heroic selflessness of gear-laden response teams climbing past them on the narrow stairwells to reach victims still trapped on the higher floors. The equipment weighing them down would not suffice to extinguish the jet fuel-ignited fires sustained by flammable furniture and office supplies that were raging across the World Trade Center's wide-open floor plans, but responders would try to facilitate the evacuation. In the meantime, misinformed 9/11 operators were telling the many frightened employees around the crash zones who managed to get a call through overworked phone lines to stay put and await rescue. Most of these employees had no choice but to wait anyway; no route down past the impact area was available in the North Tower, and only one stairwell was passable for exit downward from the top of the South Tower. Rooftop rescues, which had occurred after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, were impossible this time; doors to the roof were locked, and conditions outside were

unfavorable for helicopter landings. Many of those trapped employees, like some aboard the doomed flights, would have brief phone conversations and leave voice messages with loved ones to share their fears and say good-bye, knowing they were about to die.

At 9:37 a.m., another plane—now understood, like the others, to be a commercial airliner—crashed into a wall of the Pentagon. Shortly after, as a safety precaution, the Federal Aviation Administration grounded all 4500 aircraft that were still in flight. At the same time, the US Capitol and the White House, newly recognized as potential targets for ongoing, unpredictable threats, were evacuated. It would later be learned that United Airlines Flight 93, which smashed into a field near Shanksville, PA, was likely headed for one of those crucial federal government sites. Passengers who had spoken via airfones and cell phones with loved ones on the ground realized that, unlike past hijackings which typically served as a platform for negotiation or simply publicity, this commandeering of their airplane would unavoidably end in death for all on board. As a result, it is believed that they coordinated an attempt to regain control of the cockpit, provoking the hijackers into giving up their mission and downing the plane, killing everyone instantly, but potentially saving hundreds at the intended crash site.

Around this time in Lower Manhattan, first the South Tower, then the North Tower, crumbled while unknown numbers of civilians and rescue workers remained inside. Along with those untold deaths, the towers' falls created a noxious footprint, unsettling nearby buildings, crushing everything on the streets and sidewalks immediately below, and spewing into the air an unhealthy chemical and biological mix. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani ordered the entire section of the city evacuated, with people heading uptown on foot or taking ferries across the river. For those in the area, survival of the plane impacts, the building collapses, and their dangerous debris clouds seemed haphazard and precarious. People credited everything from the mayoral primaries to their children's first day of school with sparing them from being in the buildings early and therefore at the wrong time. Many who had the misfortune of showing up for work before 9:00 a.m. but who fortunately managed to escape were aware of near misses, with disaster striking nearby colleagues and friends but somehow not them. It was a day of repeated shocks, ushering in a period of extended suspense, of waiting for the next shoe to drop because, after all, shoe after unprecedented shoe had been dropping from morning until nightfall. Having known nothing of its beginning, there was no way for

most Americans to know for sure when and how the danger would end, leading to a foreboding that, conceivably, more extraordinary perils could still lay ahead.

By the end of the day, all seven buildings comprising the World Trade Center complex had collapsed, as well as a section of the Pentagon. When asked at a press conference that evening how many people were lost, Mayor Giuliani had replied, “The number of casualties will be more than any of us can bear ultimately” (Powell 2007), despairing words reflecting a sense in that moment of overwhelming uncertainty, grief, and helplessness. In the end, nearly 3000 people died in New York, Arlington, VA, and Pennsylvania, with more to come in later years as the environmental dangers of recovery work in Manhattan fostered fatal health complications. The death tolls included 343 firefighters and two paramedics, thirty-seven Port Authority police officers, and twenty-three city police officers. As a result, much of the subsequent news coverage focused on the devastating losses for the tight-knit organizations of uniformed professionals whose members had known each other long and well.

One study has shown that ninety-eight percent of adults in the United States watched at least one hour of that day’s televised news (Schuster et al. 2007, 29). At first, reporting dominated even non-news channels and continued uninterrupted by commercials for several days. Unlike the comparatively isolated Pentagon and the rural Pennsylvania field, the urban World Trade Center was immediately visible to multitudes in its vicinity and almost immediately to anyone with a television, especially given the extensive media coverage that began soon after the first plane’s impact. For this reason, American television viewers would not witness much at the other two sites, but they would witness the standing towers—first unexpectedly hit by planes, then with flames and smoke surging from the highest floors where people were trapped and often jumping—their collapse while civilians and rescue workers were still inside, and the resulting search-and-rescue efforts, which would produce only a dishearteningly meager handful of survivors. In fact, every day after September 11, newscasts persistently replayed images of the attacks and aired footage of the slow, gruesome recovery process in the World Trade Center’s rubble, a mass of human and architectural remains overshadowed by latticework steel beam fragments that became known locally as the “Pile” and generally as “Ground Zero.” A few statistics calculated after the attacks evoke the grisly character of what transpired in New York: 19,858 body parts were found (“9/11 by the Numbers”) while only 291 bodies were found

intact and only 1102 bodies could be identified by the New York medical examiner (Templeton and Lumley 2002). Also, 1717 families had not yet received any remains of loved ones (“9/11 by the Numbers”). In fact, as of January of 2010, only fifty-nine percent of the remains collected at the site had been identified (Reuters 2010). After that day, the date itself, “September 11,” and even more simply, “9/11,” entered circulation as the shorthand reference to the entirety of the simultaneous hijackings and their consequences. However, for the American public, the horror of what occurred at the World Trade Center figures substantially in what reference to “September 11” signifies.

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Introduction: September 11, 2001, Cultural Trauma, and Popular Culture

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001: BEGINNING THE STORY OF A DECADE

The Prologue that begins this study provides a summary of how events developed on September 11, 2001, according to aggregated news and eyewitness accounts, as well as the report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (known more commonly as the 9/11 Commission). As the years move forward, details about that morning either recede within personal memory or—for increasingly larger numbers as younger generations emerge—never resided there in the first place. The stories told about that day served at the time, do serve now, and will continue to serve in the future as the primary way it becomes known and understood. I situate this project within this process of storytelling, of recounting how something that happened on one day in 2001 provoked profound reverberations for at least a decade—the scope of this book—but likely for far, far longer.

To tell this story, I first grapple with the question of why and how I can trace to a single day such sweeping ramifications, particularly in the context of long-standing concerns about the political implications of asserting any kind of historical rupture through trauma. This leads me to outline precisely how trauma can shape (or shatter) the cultural mechanisms for remembering and interpreting experience. With this discussion pointing to the critical role narrative plays in organizing and sustaining our most fundamental sense of the world and our place in it, I then turn to how

popular culture comprises our most widely encountered and commonly accessible forms of meaning-making, albeit channeled through and against dominant cultural assumptions. In this way, popular culture can afford distinct insight into how a mass-experienced or mass-witnessed confrontation with the violation of deep-seated values and beliefs (or a “cultural trauma”) can occasion large-scale attempts—whether through book publication or television and film production, or other types of representation not included here—to render it intelligible. In effect, I treat September 11 as a case study—neither the only nor necessarily the most typical instance—of cultural trauma, whose features manifest as time unfolds across different popular culture sites, such as popular press oral history collections, literature, television, and film, all of which remain focused on or pivoted around a searing originating event.

SEPTEMBER 11: A WORLD-CHANGING EVENT?

The world changed on September 11, 2001. It also changed on September 10, 2001, and on September 12, 2001. The world changes every day, with every choice that directs human action in one way instead of another, subtly shaping the form of what we all know to be. These choices crystallize out of contingency an unfolding future that the ever-evolving present makes newly possible. As the saying goes, “Only time will tell.”

Still, what difference can a day really make, and what will time tell us about it? For many, viewing September 11 as a historical rupture is highly problematic. Literary theorist Dāwes (2011) contends that the “discourse of the ‘day that changed everything’ ... not only conveniently silences a historical tradition of imperialism, but it also revives the notion of American exceptionalism” (76) while “justify[ing] radical political moves” (74).¹ Others tie the rhetoric of traumatic disruption, which tends to imply an innocent victim (Breithaupt 2003, 69) and therefore an “absolv[ing] from possible involvement” for the United States as a nation (70), to time-worn US narratives of the loss of national innocence (Gray 2011, 2–4). Additionally, Breithaupt (2003) attributes to the ideology of trauma an anticipation of therapeutic healing (70–72). Such resistance to the possible political implications of drawing on tropes of trauma regard with caution, if not suspicion, the use of trauma theory in the study and characterization of September 11. From these perspectives, a traumatized victim occupies privileged status and is necessarily presumed to be uninvolved in the conditions generating his/her harm, and by analogy, the United

States is accorded privileged status and presumed—in historically and politically decontextualized fashion—to be uninvolved in the conditions leading to that day’s attacks. As a net result, the United States as a state obscures its embeddedness in larger global concerns, while rationalizing ever-more drastic global (and domestic) interventions. In this formulation, Americans submit, as if without memories or needs of their own, to nationalist constructions of September 11 that prioritize the memories and needs advancing state power. From this standpoint, as witnesses—even if only via the media—of the horrific predicaments and vulnerabilities of that morning, Americans become traumatized only as a result of their government’s imperialist hyperbole. Yet, trauma need not afflict only the uninvolved or the innocent. And trauma need not be understood as occurring independently of history or politics; in fact, critical scholarship on the traumatization of individuals has depended on contextualization in both respects (see DePrince and Freyd 2002; Herman 1992; Stern 2010). Moreover, as I counter here, a narrow focus on institutional discourse can leave ordinary Americans somewhat off the hook, with the state bearing the principle if not sole burden of culpability for any radical measures taken on their behalf in that day’s aftermath.

To bring heightened attention to what could be preoccupying American witnesses of September 11 in its wake, and therefore what could render many of them not only acquiescent to, but even advocates for, extreme response, I reconsider what it might mean to suggest that “the world changed” on that day. I begin by asserting that concentrating on the after-effects of one particular day provides, rather than historical decontextualization, a unique window on historical production—and by historical production, I mean the generation of activity in the “real world” that later gets recorded and analyzed through the practice of historiography. Simply by acting in the world, we all produce the material on which historical accounts depend. For this reason, I am interested in how people respond to life events not necessarily in terms of what is actually happening, but rather in terms of what they *think* is happening. The responses that follow such subjective views constitute what is observed and assessed as history. Moreover, I am interested in the relationship between seemingly inconsequential occurrences and highly consequential outcomes, a cause-and-effect interaction of intellectual value to historiographers and of intense personal concern to individuals enduring conditions beyond their control, but determinative of their life chances. This kind of scenario particularly characterizes witnesses’ and survivors’ experiences of terrorism and other

abrupt acts of horrific violence, leaving a recognizable imprint on interpretations of the horror and its aftermath. Large-scale traumas tend to foreground the connections and the tensions between meta-history and day-to-day life, between what has happened and how it feels, between what is remembered in authoritative ways and what seeps through the seams of formal discourse to fuel simmering uncertainties, anxieties, and fears. And so, I argue that what was understood to be happening on September 11 would inform which reactions to that event would be regarded as necessary, possible, or appropriate. Somehow, the War on Terror following September 11, while never inevitable, evidently became plausible in that day's wake²—and specifying that “somehow,” the fertile ground of the first decade of the twenty-first century from which the War on Terror emerges, is this book's ambition.

To begin to specify this fertile ground, I first must elaborate how experience in general is rendered meaningful in provocative ways. From a phenomenological standpoint, interactive processes structure each person's interpretive encounter with his or her environment. In effect, existence becomes comprehensible at all to people through a continual, mutually constructing engagement between what their socially produced subjectivities prepare them to expect and what a dynamic universe has to offer. From this perspective, the known world changes with every engagement that exceeds or confounds extant social constructions of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Kuhn 1996). Stolorow (2007), drawing on this kind of “phenomenological contextualism” (1), notes that horizons of understanding—possibilities and limits for knowledge of the world set by a subject's historical, relational circumstances—can seem incommensurable between those who have been traumatized and those who have not (15). In more material terms, Raymond Williams (1977) conceives of culture as a fluid meaning-making process attuned to constraints and developments within time and space, as indicated by how residual (traces of the past in the present) and emergent (future possibilities percolating in the present) elements inform any given contemporary cultural formation (122–127). Although in different ways, both theoretical frameworks envision people as products of, meaning-makers of, and participants in an ever-changing world. People interpret new information and act within the context of what they already know, continually straddling between the familiar and the unfamiliar. These different but compatible conceptions of how experience becomes structured and comprehensible accommodate routine existence, while also setting the parameters past which the routine

becomes exceptional. So, one could envision the world as changing in its meaning and conditions constantly but incrementally, but also rarely and comprehensively, depending on the degree to which the familiar and unfamiliar diverge.

Then, there is the butterfly effect. This is chaos theory's metaphor for how variations in initial conditions, no matter how seemingly insignificant, can produce crucially varying outcomes. As a colloquial example, a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil might contribute just enough to the atmospheric factors necessary to generate a Texas tornado—so that if there were no butterfly in Brazil, there would be no tornado in Texas (Lorenz 1972). From such a perspective, even the most minute of our unthinking daily activities becomes ripe with portentous, world-changing implications, although we likely will not realize this, if at all, until much later, when consequences come to fruition.

In these senses, then, the world changes every day. Notably, though, on September 11, 2001, many actually noticed this, and at the same time. Something dramatic and terrible happened to a lot of people in front of a planet of witnesses, leading to speculation that things would be different, and not in a good way, even if those who thought so either did not agree or could not say with certainty how. Again, this assertion of a “changed world” at its most expansive has been contested in many ways, including in purely political terms (Cole 2006; Dobson 2006) and on the grounds of its problematic erasure of historical context (McAlister 2002). According to Slavoj Žižek (2002), the “greatest surprise” was that “America got what it fantasized about” (387), experiencing an event well foreshadowed in the media-generated imaginary (385–387). But Jean Baudrillard (2002), for one, has noted that “the Manhattan attack ... might be presented as quite a good illustration of chaos theory: an initial impact causing incalculable consequences” (23). In fact, Baudrillard once claimed that “the whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event” (4). Less expansively, terrorism expert Brian Jenkins (2009a) views September 11 as having altered the perceptions at least of those in the security community, who would now have to regard as possible scenarios once considered to be far-fetched. In response to September 11, analysis shifted from threat-based (countered by finite resources) to vulnerability-based (featuring infinite potential) assessments, through which the magnitude of consequences would trump the uncertain likelihood of an event occurring when determining functional priorities. Working from a mental health point of view, Danieli et al. (2005) contend that September 11

presented many with a “demarcating rupture” between an old and a new sense of normal (2). So, it would seem from these varying perspectives rooted within the different theoretical frames of distinct disciplines, that if—and then how—the world has changed depends on how one defines “the world,” and someone’s perception of “the world changing” and its attendant implications depends critically upon what that person’s already-formulated viewpoints about the ordinary and the extraordinary prepare him or her to believe and expect.

Certainly, one cultural practice changed immediately, even as the hijackings were underway. Conventional wisdom had held that hostages had a better chance of staying safe and keeping exigencies from escalating by discreetly awaiting resolution between hijackers and political or military authorities. However, once United Flight 93 passengers learned about the World Trade Center crashes through phone calls to loved ones on the ground, this common approach immediately and irrevocably altered to a mindset that civilians must get involved, that they form the last line of defense against harm, not only to themselves, but to others as well, because terrorists now seemed to seek destruction rather than negotiation. This approach manifested in travelers thwarting Richard Reid’s attempt to ignite a bomb in his shoe on American Airlines Flight 63 in December 2001 and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s attempt to ignite a bomb in his underwear on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 in December 2009. This approach also informs the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign which former Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Janet Napolitano exported nationally from its origins in New York City, where it prompted a street vendor’s successful intervention against a Times Square bombing in May 2010 (Daly 2010). This novel addition to the average person’s repertoire of safety precautions poses but one of the many identifiable transformations to how we now view foreseeable urban dangers as well as our customary role regarding transportation and crowds, among other features of daily life.

Indeed, what Baudrillard (2002) terms a “subtle mental terrorism”—the idea of potential terrorists living clandestine among us, as did the September 11 hijackers for months—causes suspicion of all individuals, including the least conspicuous, and all situations, even the most benign (20). With the September 11 hijackers reportedly male citizens of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates (McDermott 2005, xiii–xiv), this “subtle mental terrorism” metastasized as post-September 11 suspicions specifically of Arabs, Muslims, those appearing

to be Arab or Muslim, and—even more specifically—of men fitting any of these descriptions. This reflects a recognized aim of terrorist strategy: to produce sufficient fear in a nation's population to erode social and political trust (Breckenridge and Zimbardo 2007, 116–118). Indeed, social and political trust has eroded, particularly along the fault line demarcating suspect groups from those to be protected. As a result, while acts of terror such as September 11 might victimize indiscriminately, those regarded with suspicion simultaneously also endure treatment as potential threats. While there is nothing novel about the imposition of power through constructs of race, religion, gender, and citizenship, every manifestation has its specificities. Given the rapid actualization of these domestic ruptures immediately following September 11, what was it about September 11 that so efficiently catalyzed extreme reactions? Might the “changed world” augured on September 11 have involved pervasive alterations to such fundamental horizons of understanding that once conceivable but remote possibilities readily became both likely and urgent?

HOW TRAUMA CHANGES THE WORLD³

Philosopher Susan Brison (2002) has characterized her 1990 sexual assault and attempted murder as producing a “nonsensical entry” that disrupted any sense of a meaningful trajectory for her life (103–104). At one time, she felt she could anticipate a narrative flow leading from her past, through her present, to a not-predictable, but at least conceivable, future. Then, unforeseeably and uncontrollably, an event occurred that fit nowhere within that narrative flow. This event—this trauma—stunted the familiar, existing patterns contouring her personal worldview; her life story would no longer continue in the way she once took for granted. Instead, she would need to craft a new story, one that could take into account the precipitating trauma and enable her to live in the world in which it had happened (104).

Commonly, those who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event—whether that event involves a sexual assault or the September 11 attacks—have responded, “The world is different now. It’s like a whole new place, and things will never be the same.” How can such entirely disparate events result in such similar reactions? Psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1992) has argued that trauma shatters the most fundamental assumptions that govern functional daily living, leaving survivors and witnesses questioning what they really can know about and do in this world. Her

book *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* specifies the fracturing of three basic assumptions—"The world is benevolent/The world is meaningful/The self is worthy" (6)—developed during the earliest stages of human development that establish human understanding of the nature of the world and one's place in it. These meta-narratives serve as guiding principles for daily life, functional illusions that might not be universally and without exception true, but that persist stubbornly because they are suited well enough to typical experience to enable people to function without having to second-guess themselves and others at every step. Basically, her theory of trauma serves as a theory of everyday life by suggesting that it operates on the basis of assumptions that remain essentially invisible until their disruption brings them to the fore. This shattered assumptions model, developed in the context of psychology, seeks to articulate how trauma affects individuals and what traumatic aftereffects indicate not just about the post-traumatic state but also about the state of "ordinary" life, the state that trauma foregrounds as a shatterable world.

Following this view, trauma poses significant cultural implications as well.⁴ After all, culture serves as a site through which meanings about human life are produced, challenged, and negotiated (Williams 1958, 282; Hall 1981, 228). Indeed, given that cultural processes cultivate and support meaningful human life, an event of sufficient scale and scope to shatter collectively held fundamental convictions could trigger a cultural trauma, wherein members of whole communities, cohered through a shared system of beliefs and practices, whether as neighborhoods or nations, must wrestle with similar meaning disruption and reconstruction. Some notions of collective trauma have tended to signal only that many people experience distress after encountering the same crisis, without accounting for the distinctly event-specific ways individuals interact personally with seemingly impersonal crises. At the same time, some notions of cultural trauma have tended to overemphasize the psychoanalytic dysfunctions of melancholia and dissociation. Differently, my approach to cultural trauma focuses on why and how particular features of a crisis destabilize certain groups of people, leaving them in its wake susceptible to a spectrum of responses oriented specifically to the crisis' self- and worldview violations. Here, I explore the culturally traumatic not by searching for PTSD-resonant symptoms (Are there dissociative elements or flashbacks?),⁵ but rather by questioning what is at stake: what fundamental expectations have been invalidated, what once-reliable narratives have been contradicted, what worldview has been utterly confounded?

Accordingly, I adapt contemporary formulations of trauma theory within psychology to a cultural studies understanding of how trauma functions as a crisis of knowledge and power for individuals in relationship with their communities, exposing fault lines within cultural formations and, in doing so, occasioning the need for alternative possibilities.

In *Time, Narrative, and History*, David Carr (1986) explores the lived experience of time, a phenomenological approach that has affinities with Janoff-Bulman's psychologically grounded theories and attunes usefully to the exigencies of confronting trauma. He argues that narrative does not necessarily impose an artificial link between sequenced occurrences. Contrary to theorists who view narrative essentially as an artful effort at making meaning of what could merely be chronicled (15), Carr argues that narrative operates intrinsically within the act of living (16–17; see also Funkenstein 1992, 66–67). In effect, past, present, and future considerations (i.e., the retention of memories, the protention of intentions, etc.) intermingle as a person acts within the present (29–31) to produce immediately meaningful events—narratively structured events with recognizable beginnings, middles, and ends (46–52), as well as actors conscious of real or potential audiences to their actions as stories (61). Such an argument advances narrative as in fact constitutive of action (61) and the self (73). In effect, then, narratives not only provide access to cultural formations of self and world, they in fact produce cultural selves and worlds.

Precisely, what was the world that pre-September 11 narratives had constructed and that day's developments seemed to belie? In the United States, an enduring, defining story has been termed in shorthand the "American Dream," an assertion of US exceptionalism's claims to favored status for an American people who will always overcome the challenges they face. It is a vision of good people making the right choices. It is an ideal grounded in optimism that cherishes self-determination and assumes a just world in which good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. It is a promise that has beckoned: come to the United States, and you will have opportunity; work hard, and you will succeed; follow the rules, and you will be rewarded. Like Janoff-Bulman's notion of functional illusions for the individual, a cultural story like the American Dream is neither uniformly accurate nor universally true.⁶ Rather, it needs only to characterize daily life sufficiently well and often enough to enable a community of people to feel sure about what actions and values the community to which they belong endorses. Such stories help to make a cultural world intelligible and help individuals feel they

participate meaningfully in that cultural world. As a norm, the American Dream is part of cultural power, suiting some better than others within the United States while still remaining recognizable to all. But what did participants in and those cognizant of the cultural world constructed through the American Dream see on September 11, 2001? They witnessed moments of ineluctable fate in the doom of helpless airplane passengers, unintended consequences in the choices to go to work at the World Trade Center earlier or later than usual and live or die as a result, and blowback in the form of attack by a figure, Osama bin Laden, supported by the United States in the Soviet war in Afghanistan but angered by the US presence in Saudi Arabia. Rather than claims to exceptionally favored status and always hard-earned and well-deserved triumph against all odds, US cultural stories now pervasively involve no-win scenarios for even the purest of fictional characters and a fascination with anti-heroes who do the wrong things for the right reasons. These stories are often characterized by existential crisis, vulnerability, and moral ambivalence, conditions that directly counter those notions of optimism, self-determination, and belief in a just world that underpin the American Dream narrative. That story, like any dominant cultural narrative, has never been true and applicable for everyone, and since complexity and multiplicity characterize cultural formations, other kinds of narratives similarly circulate throughout different US communities at varying degrees of existential relevance and foundational impact. However, I focus here on the violation of a dominant cultural narrative because preoccupation with its violation seems to signal a fundamental breach with abiding, pervasive, extensive (in fact, global), and costly repercussions.

So, since daily life becomes meaningful through narrative structures—since fundamental assumptions are constructed through narratives that can also manifest in their disruption the shattering of these assumptions—I evaluate these interactions of injury and context through a study of various narrative responses to September 11. Specifically, the popular culture—which I view here as any cultural form readily accessible to and readily interactive with the average, or non-expert, person or people, and which presumes some measure of mass familiarity with its subject matter and themes⁷—of popular press oral histories, literary fiction, television, and film provides useful resources for excavating meaning challenge and negotiation. In the tradition of case study methodology, I have selected these multiple, distinct sites of interrogation to signal the breadth of engagement with September 11 across types of representation, kinds of

audiences, and the forward movement of time. Throughout these diverse texts linger both the threat to conscious intention that the butterfly effect poses—the idea that even our most inadvertent activities can shape our most consequential destinies—and the discomforting ambivalence of living in a world where the day-to-day might largely seem quite similar to our pre-September 11 routines, even as the horizons for our existential stability have shifted to accommodate the post-September 11 possibility of sudden, unforeseeable, and utter calamity.⁸ I focus on one day, September 11, 2001, to better understand how a single event can trigger a cultural trauma through its profound aftereffects. I also focus on September 11 as an instance of cultural trauma to better learn what cultural trauma suggests about general processes of cultural destabilization and change. Again, this day is by no means unique as a cultural trauma; rather, I use it as a kind of case study to outline a particular approach that could be applicable to other occurrences of comparable moment. In effect, I only begin to explore here how trauma exposes, tests, and reconstitutes how cultural subjects and worlds are constructed.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE NOTION OF A “CULTURAL” TRAUMA⁹

Janoff-Bulman’s characterization of certain fundamental assumptions as functional illusions resonates with theories of knowledge in other disciplines, particularly Berger and Luckmann’s formulation of the social construction of reality and Thomas Kuhn’s (whom she cites) assessment of how knowledge forms through crisis. Moreover, drawing parallels between the conservatism of the worldview constituted by her foundational assumptions and the notion of hegemony, connections could emerge between the flexible yet insistent recuperation of power that hegemony exerts to rationalize and maintain the dominant group’s position (Lears 1985) and the flexible yet insistent recuperation of knowledge that assumptive worlds exert to rationalize and maintain a dominant meta-narrative. Indeed, Raymond Williams (1977) outlines hegemony as an ongoing process with residual and emergent elements that evidence the slow and stubborn character of hegemonic cultural development, lived out with uneven commitment in daily life by individuals at varying levels within the hegemonic structure (122–127). This conception attends to formations, or culturally influential movements or bodies less formal than institutions (119), and structures of feeling, or how cultural life is

actually lived with change and contradiction, through the ephemeral but nevertheless recognizable patterns of cultural meanings determined by the circumstances in which they arise (128–135).¹⁰ In this context, a shared trauma—such as that made possible by the daily televised reports of the Vietnam War or the live broadcast of the attacks of September 11—poses an immediate threat to dominant paradigms of meaning and power that, like an individual’s recovery, only subsequent time and effort could integrate into newly meaningful cultural constructs. In such a case, if the parallel to individual recovery from trauma were to hold true, the likely outcome would involve adjusted, but not wholly new, cultural formations of knowledge and power, and the stakes for developing constructs that reinstate meaning and security for starkly threatened communities would be just as high as (if not higher than) the stakes facing a lone individual in the aftermath of a personal trauma. This view of cultural trauma would underscore the political complications that shared trauma generates; like individuals, communities—whether towns, nations, or alliances—would face difficult, and given the traumatic circumstance less than ideal, options for productively integrating a past, and preventing a new, traumatic threat.

With the term “cultural trauma” adapting theory in psychology to that of cultural studies, Ball (2000) perceives one opportunity in viewing the core character of trauma as extraordinary human experience:

by highlighting the aftereffects of the past as they play themselves out in the cultural sphere, the institutionalization of trauma studies may provide cultural critics with a paradigm for attending to structures of feeling. When it is conceived with this end in mind, trauma studies follows through on a desire to think the ‘materiality of affect’ and thereby unsettle the false opposition between the subjective and objective dimensions of existence. (28)

In this sense, trauma as a cultural phenomenon permits exploration of socially constructed knowledge and being, with attention paid both to the materiality of a fraught world and to the interpersonally created, fluidly developing but contextually grounded ways we come to know and be in it.¹¹

In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Alexander et al. (2004) collaborate to generate a thorough sociological theory of trauma’s effect on communities, writing:

We may now advance a formal definition of cultural trauma: a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and

evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions. (Smelser 2004, 44)

They link psychological with cultural trauma at what they regard as the indispensable and universal juncture of affect, a Freudian concept which signals the positive or negative associations an event poses for an individual's identity. Often, individuals have informed and invested their personal identifications through a larger collective; so, these sociologists argue, when threats to a collective also threaten the identifications individuals have developed in connection with that collective, cultural trauma emerges (Smelser 2004, 39–41). Moreover, Sztompka (2004) asserts, social change can prove culturally traumatic given four conditions: (1) rapid change (2) of comprehensive scope that (3) alters fundamental constructs (4) provoking a shocked reception (158–159). In effect, this framework establishes the relationship of psychological and cultural trauma through the locus of personal identity, accounting for the reach and character of cultural trauma by stressing individuals' dependence on social structures of identification and belonging. Above all, this framework construes trauma as a constructed, rather than a natural and given, phenomenon.

I draw in varying ways on the foregoing work in psychology, literary and cultural studies, and sociology to inform my own premises, which recognize the culturally contextual aspect of traumatic occurrences. However, I draw particularly on Janoff-Bulman's shattered assumptions formulation to examine the unique phenomenological, epistemological, and existential vulnerabilities trauma exposes within individuals and cultures. Indeed, the questions psychologists who were deployed to Ground Zero had anticipated from the survivors and witnesses they would treat point to specific phenomenological, epistemological, and existential quandaries: "What happened to me (us)?... Why did it happen to me (us)?... Why did I (we) do what I (we) did during and right after this disaster?... Why have I (we) acted as I (we) have since the disaster?... Will I (we) be able to cope if this disaster happens again" (Gold and Faust 2002, 20–21)? Consequently, while I share with E. Ann Kaplan (2005) an interest in how cultural trauma warrants responsibility and ethical action (123), I assert the intense challenges trauma poses to ethical choice by virtue of its essential threat to conceptions of intact subjectivity and plausible agency. Additionally, while the sociological model of cultural trauma effec-

tively delineates conditions under which communities can be considered traumatized, it lists the destabilization of cultural meaning formations as one among other factors occasioning a cultural trauma. However, I argue that such a destabilization is the fundamental threat of a traumatic event from which all other conditions flow. It is just such a threat that prompts the negative affect the sociological model locates as crucial, that seems to augur indelibility, and that, again, complicates the very notions of intact subjectivity and plausible agency through which any sense of identity can be imagined. Likewise, I view this threat as the grounds from which traumatic social change flows; rather than one among other elements, the compromise of core cultural beliefs can force members of a community into revisiting and reconstructing their self- and worldviews. Moreover, my focus on worldview as the crux of what a cultural trauma disrupts moves attention away from the dominant concerns within literary and cultural studies on Freudian notions of dissociation and melancholia. Instead of dwelling entirely on the enduring inaccessibility and compulsive repetitions of traumatic experience—only two components among an array of possible post-traumatic symptoms for an individual—I am interested in how cultural trauma renders an effable and explicable daily life suddenly inexplicable and unpredictable, with the challenges this fracturing poses engaged in a fully explicit and conscious way. After all, the inability to comprehend and articulate a traumatic rupture does not necessarily equate with forgetting that rupture. While tales of heroism and redemption might offer competing narratives of September 11, I argue here that the persistence of stories permeated by helplessness and despair evidence that such phenomena, rather than having been forgotten, simply called for incorporation within a US cultural framework that previously had no place for them and was ill-prepared to accept them.

ELABORATING THE FERTILE GROUND FOR POST-SEPTEMBER 11 RESPONSES

Underpinning this notion of September 11 as a phenomenologically world-changing event constituting a cultural trauma, that day affected Americans in readily recognizable ways, enriching the “fertile ground” for extreme response mentioned earlier. To begin, in general, research in psychology suggests that the character of the originating event plays a role in shaping possible aftereffects. For example, Fullerton et al. (2003) term intentional interpersonal violence “perhaps the most disturbing

traumatic experience” (3), with terrorism distinctly occasioning “characteristic extensive fear, loss of confidence in institutions, unpredictability and pervasive experience of loss of safety” (5). Hassani (2007) asserts, “Terrorism erodes, at both the individual and the community level, the sense of security and safety of daily life. It defies our natural need to conceptualize life on earth as predictable, orderly, logical, and controllable” (1). Accordingly, trauma deriving from terrorism—as intended—touches witnesses as well as survivors, a strategic targeting of an entire community’s psychological composure (Howie 2013).

If terrorism does pose a particularly potent threat of psychological traumatization, then how might September 11 be understood as a particular instance of terrorism? Referencing Janoff-Bulman’s shattered assumptions theoretical model for individuals, psychologists Gold and Faust (2002) list the following developments as having been previously conventionally inconceivable within the United States: witnessing live the Pentagon’s vulnerability “to direct attack,” the World Trade Center’s swift and total collapse, the coordinated hijacking of domestic commercial aircraft, and the foreign organization and perpetration of such attacks within American territory (2). They assert, “The attacks ... and the subsequent threat of acts of biological, chemical, and nuclear warfare, immediately and drastically created a shift in perspective ... the constantly looming specter of sudden, large-scale terrorist assaults arouses the potential for a type of trauma that is relatively new and about which, therefore, little is known” (3). According to Gold and Faust, September 11 shattered assumptions not only for Americans in general but also for the psychologists who must anticipate for effective rehabilitation the kinds of traumatic disruptions that might afflict their future clients. At the same time, Pyszczynski et al. (2003), drawing on terror management theory (TMT), argue that “reminders of death should lead people to increase their defense and bolstering of their cultural worldviews” (45). Yum and Schenck-Hamlin’s (2005) research confirms the TMT-oriented anticipation that September 11 would prompt individuals toward the psychological defensive measures of strengthening their self-esteem and reinforcing their worldview (266). With September 11 having showcased sudden, inescapable death, mortality becomes consciously salient for individuals who ordinarily do not think about it (94), prompting defensive reactions—such as trading freedom for security—against the now-present sense of looming vulnerability (98–100). From this standpoint, September 11 occasions a confrontation with mortal precariousness for many people at the same time.

With an estimated 15,552 people in the World Trade Center on September 11 (J. Murphy 2009, 66), the attack directly affected approximately 160,000 people in the New York area (Rosack November 1, 2002a) but induced PTSD in an estimated 530,000 New Yorkers (Rosack 2002b). Two to three years later, 95.6 percent of World Trade Center civilian survivors reported at least one PTSD symptom, with an estimated fifteen percent suffering from diagnosable PTSD. While a lower income presented the greatest demographic risk factor for development of PTSD, researchers also found—in accord with previous studies—that women, African-Americans, and Latina/Latinos suffered higher rates of the disorder, possibly as a result of pre-existing vulnerabilities. However, also in accord with other studies, the degree of exposure to the event itself mattered, with witnessing horrors among the compounding elements of PTSD (DiGrande et al. 2010). Moreover, hundreds of the city’s firefighters and police officers, groups that suffered unprecedented casualties that day, were no longer active two years later (Lipton and McIntire 2003).

Although psychological studies tend to focus on individual struggles with PTSD, the unprecedented scope of exposure resulting from broadcast images of the World Trade Center have prompted exploration of traumatization among those witnessing at a distance nationally and even internationally (Gold and Faust 2002). Silver et al. (2005) found that many people who encountered that day’s events only at a distance, such as through television viewing, experienced significant symptoms (139). Indeed, Suvak et al. (2008) concluded that indirect exposure does produce low-level, PTSD-consistent symptoms. Some estimated that as many as twenty percent of Americans knew someone injured or killed that day (“9/11 by the Numbers”).¹² PTSD-associated symptoms were connected to the amount of time national television viewers watched coverage of September 11, with television viewing interpreted as a coping mechanism rather than an added stressor (Schuster et al. 2007, 33).¹³ One health study reports a twelve percent jump in miscarriages across the United States in the month of September 2001, substantiating the notion that what happened in New York, Pennsylvania, and the Washington, DC, area produced considerable stress even in witnesses from afar (Perone 2010). Another study evidenced a national spike in smoking among those who had formerly quit (*Cornell Chronicle* 2013). Other national studies conducted within one to three months of the attacks indicated that a

peak of seventy-one percent of Americans reported depressive feelings (Huddy et al. 2002, 422); forty-four percent were substantially troubled by at least one of five PTSD symptoms, and ninety percent were troubled by at least low levels of stress (Schuster et al. 2007, 29), and a majority had cried, felt anxious, or found sleeping difficult (Schlenger 2005, 98). A peak of fifty-eight percent of Americans were at least somewhat worried that they themselves would become victims of terrorism (Huddy et al. 2002, 422), and by October, as many as eighty-eight percent of polled Americans regarded another attack on the United States as at least somewhat likely (420). Also in the three months after the attacks, traffic deaths rose, apparently reflecting increased volume as many turned to driving out of fear of flying. Ironically, the increased automobile deaths numbered more than those killed on the doomed September 11 flights (Gigerenzer 2004). Moreover, church and synagogue attendance rose by as much as twenty percent (Templeton and Lumley 2002). Although studies conducted in later months evidenced more normative levels of distress (Schlenger 2005, 103),¹⁴ up to three years later, researchers found a “53% increased incidence of cardiovascular ailments” that they linked to stress induced by watching the September 11 attacks on television (Holman et al. 2008, 73). Such numbers indicate the extent to which the attacks provoked some kind of initial psychological disturbance with which not only New Yorkers or Washington, DC, area residents but also others across the United States had to contend.

In effect, because of television, radio, and the Internet, the hijackings singularly exposed millions of people to the same threat and its consequences at the same time, creating a shared touchstone for what ultimate helplessness is all about. At the same time, counterterrorism researchers and policy advisers have described the kind of terrorism introduced on September 11 as a menace endemic to our new reality (Jenkins 2009b; Treverton 2010), echoing (and likely informing) the Bush administration’s position after that day. A San Antonio, TX, news report in 2006 evokes this lasting pall, noting that even five years later, many in that community—geographically distant from the crash sites—had unresolved feelings about September 11, complicated in the time that had passed by political, military, and other responses (Stoeltje 2006). Given these kinds of research findings, it seems appropriate to infer that, similar to what Marita Sturken (1997) notes about the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic, “America is inconceivable without” (14) September 11.

SEPTEMBER 11 AND CULTURAL TRAUMA: POPULAR CULTURE NARRATIVE AS CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

In regard to cultural memory, Sturken (1997) writes, “Crisis occurs when cultural rules are broken—when both the structures and the fractures of a culture are most visible” (258). In the aftermath process of meaning formation, she argues that cultural memory links the past with the present through the production-through-consumption practices of a diverse and often divergent American public (257–259). In this sense, popular culture narratives can serve as a “technology of memory,” or a mechanism by which audiences interact with the cultural narratives to negotiate the implications of a shared experience (1, 9–10).

Consequently, as noted earlier, it is important specifically to attend to the kinds of culturally produced meaningful selves and worlds evidenced and constructed through narrative—the kinds of selves and worlds that traumatic events disrupt and reveal as contingent and vulnerable, and the kinds of selves and worlds that directly confront the contingency and vulnerability that have become apparent.¹⁵ Popular culture provides commonly accessible texts that foster distinct contact points for people from varied social locations to absorb, negotiate, and/or contest the dominant cultural meanings that such texts reproduce and reconfigure (Williams 1958, 282; Hall 1981, 228). Here, I explore multiple sites of narrative formation, including popular press oral histories, literature, televised fiction, and film to analyze cultural processes of meaning disruption and development in relation to September 11. I begin to explore these complex interactions by focusing on the dominant cultural meanings that popular culture texts have proliferated in the first decade after September 11. I perform a close reading of each text, critiquing the narrative as a cultural artifact that produces meaning explicitly through its self-characterizations, implicitly through its thematic preoccupations, and wholly self-aware about its engagement with September 11 as originating trauma. Such an approach counters the tendency to emphasize “unknowability” as well as notions of “amnesia” that permeates the psychoanalytic perspective informing trauma theory in historical and literary studies.¹⁶ Rather, such an approach reflects anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s (1972) “guiding principle” that “societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations” (29) and social practices, such as popular culture production and consumption, operate in a “way which opens [a participant’s] subjectivity to himself” (28), to which close reading can provide access (29). Accordingly, I use these

popular culture texts to assess the extent to which dominant significations have been disrupted and reconstructed in the wake of September 11. In this way, I seek to underscore the structures of feeling that made possible, while not necessitating, eventual dominant responses, including the War on Terror, but also widespread conspiracy theory or “truth” movements, among others.¹⁷

Cognizant of the heterogeneity of these selected forms of popular culture, throughout the following chapters, I elaborate how each kind of text is situated within or against its respective methodological, theoretical, formal, critical, and/or aesthetic conventions, as well as how the passing of time matters to specific representational forms and concerns. As a guiding and unifying premise, though, I regard areas of overlap and divergence among these different texts as particularly useful for signaling the parameters of cultural conceptions of existential safety, individual control in contrast to helplessness or fate, and vulnerability and victimization. Although I address dominant or mainstream discursive formations (those supported by substantial resources, made widely available to large numbers of readers and viewers, and featuring forms and content readily familiar to those readers and viewers) that focus on September 11 itself and its immediate aftermath, I have avoided narratives that transparently and uncritically either reinforce or contradict such discourses, opting instead for more nuanced texts whose ambivalences not only occasion but clearly invite reader and viewer interaction. Such texts more usefully register the ongoing relevance and complexity of the issues they raise and leave at least somewhat unresolved for their readers and viewers, who thereby are positioned, not as passive receptacles for the imposition of meaning about this event, but rather active participants in determining its significations. Specifically, I am evaluating how these texts evidence and engage September 11 for their varying audiences as a cultural trauma generating problematic subject positions that complicate agency and ethical response.

In Chap. 2, “Popular Press Oral Histories of September 11,” I have selected three popular press oral history collections about September 11: *New York Times* journalist Dean E. Murphy’s 2002 *September 11: An Oral History*, former *New York Daily News* gossip columnist Mitchell Fink and his wife Lois Matthias’ 2002 *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*, and writer, actor, and Drew University Theater Arts instructor Damon DiMarco’s 2007 *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11*. Each set of stories centralizes eyewitness accounts of in-the-moment action as the day’s exigencies progress, particularly from witnesses and survivors who were

present at the World Trade Center. As publications for mass, rather than academic, consideration in the years immediately after September 11, these oral histories self-consciously position themselves as contributions to an accessible public historical record. Accordingly, I assess the impact of offering as enduring documentation of September 11 narratives shaped by the experiential limitations of people caught in dire and chaotic circumstances. In effect, I consider how these anecdotes of discrete personal ordeals root a history of September 11 in radical unsettlements about safety and agency, unsettlements that intimate a culturally traumatic rupture of expectations about ordinary life.

In Chap. 3, “Limning the ‘Howling Space’ of September 11 Through Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*,” I review Don DeLillo’s December 2001 *Harper’s Magazine* essay, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” in connection with his 2007 novel, *Falling Man*, whose title echoes the predicament of victims who jumped from the World Trade Center, but whose main character is a survivor. Both texts grapple with envisioning the personal and public aftereffects of September 11. Specifically, as both the essay’s and the novel’s titles indicate, these texts dwell on how some of that day’s most troubling features can endure as ongoing, never-resolved crises for both survivors and witnesses. Accordingly, I explore in this chapter on fiction issues addressed in the preceding chapter on nonfiction: World Trade Center survivors’ compromised subjectivity and agency, witnesses’ ambivalent identifications with the plight of those who jumped from the towers, questions about choice and fate, and doubts about whether the aftermath of September 11 will ever reach a state of resolution. In this way, I consider how Don DeLillo’s writing further delineates the fissures that comprise the cultural trauma of September 11.

In Chap. 4, “The Crisis Fetish in Post-September 11 American Television,” I move from the sites of nonfiction of the first chapter and the literary fiction of the second chapter to look at television programs airing in the mid- to late-2000s, including ABC Studios’ 2004–2010 television series *Lost*, British Sky Broadcasting’s 2005–2009 science fiction serial *Battlestar Galactica*, and ABC Studios’ short-lived 2009–2010 fantasy *FlashForward*. As serialized fictions developed through the creative freedoms of the science fiction and fantasy genres, these series can summon real-world headlines to inform themes and plots for mass viewers without necessarily conforming to real-world factions and outcomes in partisan ways that might alienate some of those viewers. Accordingly, I explore

how each show forms part of a sustained consideration of the possibilities, limitations, and ethics of human beings trying to nourish community and combat enemies under conditions of extreme threat and precarious survival, with oblique reference to these issues' real-world corollaries. In this way, I determine how unresolved tensions around notions of safety and choice point to traumatic fractures within post-September 11 cultural formations.

In Chap. 5, “‘Nothing to Do with All Your Strength’: Power, Choice, and September 11 in *The Dark Knight*,” I analyze producer and director Christopher Nolan’s 2008 film *The Dark Knight*. Like the television shows considered in the previous chapter, references to September 11 infuse this blockbuster’s plot and images, which revolve around a city and its public servants virtually taken hostage by a sociopathic villain interested in escalating violence against law enforcers and civilians alike while engineering these crises in a way that permits only morally problematic responses. Accordingly, I evaluate how the movie stages that day’s events and with what possible effects for viewers who, just seven years earlier, would most likely have been witnesses if not survivors of the hijackings. In effect, I consider how the film dramatizes September 11-generated, culturally traumatic impasses about balancing public safety and justice.

Following these four chapters dwelling on irresolution and ambivalence after September 11, in Chap. 6, “*Zero Dark Thirty* and the Fantasy of Closure,” I address cultural notions of narrative, psychological, and historical “closure” through the lens of this film’s reception as well as, and in comparison to, real-life reactions to the SEAL Team Six operation that killed bin Laden. In the midst of controversy about its depiction of the CIA’s detainee interrogation program, *Zero Dark Thirty*’s ultimate evasion of any certain, unproblematic resolution occasions for viewers an opportunity to assess for themselves the ethics of the conduct and trajectory of the War on Terror. Accordingly, rather than certifying closure, as some regarded bin Laden’s death on the evening of May 1, 2011, *Zero Dark Thirty* draws viewers into self-reflexive involvement in the as-yet unresolved implications of September 11 and the US responses that followed.

Ann Cvetkovich (2003) has voiced a common concern by asserting her resistance to “the idea that, after September 11, everything has changed and nothing will be the same again” (65). However, as the work on trauma across disciplines has suggested, what might be important is not whether such a reaction is socially, politically, or historically true, but what happens to social, political, and historical realities when survivors’ and

witnesses' lived experiences intimate that fundamental, however illusory, violation? How does that perception matter to what happens next? This project seeks to identify some of the cultural discordances that September 11 has provoked, topographically delineating the terrain from which the answers to the question of "what happens next" can be more distinctly framed and understood. In her *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, Hannah Arendt (2007) draws on the phrase "no longer and not yet" to characterize the experiential discontinuities between those whose subjective formation began before a great loss and those for whom subjectivity and this great loss have developed together, hand-in-hand (121–125)—"a kind of historical no man's land" (121) in which each form of subjectivity can be considered effectively incommensurate with the other, and equally insufficient in relating integrally to the present moment. For me, the phrase usefully calls to mind the interstitial break awaiting resolution in between what was lost—whether an object or a whole way of life—and what will replace it. Danielle Gardner (2005), whose brother Doug died while working at Cantor Fitzgerald in the North Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, once wrote:

Perhaps another legacy for us is to wrest the event back from the realm of the purely symbolic that it resides in for the rest of the country and the world. Our legacy is to reinsert the victims into the tragedy; to clarify and remind that what really happened on September 11 is that people died. Everything stems from that—all politics, all artistic responses, all military initiatives, all rebuilding concepts. Yet it is continually forgotten. People died. (622)

The War on Terror develops after September 11, becoming a self-referencing entity of its own, generating new concerns and new dilemmas that refine the conceptual boundaries of dominant US beliefs and practices in the early twenty-first century. But, before all of that was September 11, a day that provided the fecund material through which something like the War on Terror could become possible.

NOTES

1. Many, operating from a variety of disciplinary vantage points, have expressed this concern. For example, media scholars Reynolds and Barnett (2003) argue that CNN coverage framed events toward rationalizing war, although not necessarily consciously; rather, this

perspective emerged from journalism's pre-existing ideological performance (85–101). International Relations scholar Stuart Croft (2006) terms popular culture and Bush administration discourses the “decisive intervention” in making possible the War on Terror by advancing mutually reinforcing justifications for a response to the “shock” and “horror” of September 11 (266).

2. Others have attended to how the War on Terror was rooted in, but need not have been a necessary result of, September 11. For example, Holland (2009), who has traced the political transformation of September 11 from a discursive void to a crisis, draws on Croft's work (among others) to create “critical space” by similarly separating as not inevitably linked the day's events from the subsequent War on Terror (277). He is concerned to show specifically the “contingency of foreign policy” (289). Similarly, McAlister (2002) outlines a “cultural history” of the War on Terror by tracing popular culture's engagement with terrorism since the 1972 Munich Olympics.
3. It is important to note at the outset that pathological reactions to trauma are noteworthy specifically because they are non-normative. Social scientists are attending increasingly to the notion of resilience, or a condition of healthful coping with stressful events (for a brief introductory overview, see Suedfeld 1997).
4. Janoff-Bulman (2006) has characterized the September 11 attacks as a “collective” or “national” trauma (325; Janoff-Bulman and Usoof-Thowfeek 2009, 81), citing the loss of social beliefs about safety and US exceptionalism (2006, 325–326; Janoff-Bulman and Usoof-Thowfeek 2009, 81–82). She also points to increased moralizing in the national political terrain as a principle outcome of this sense of existential threat (Janoff-Bulman and Usoof-Thowfeek 2009, 82–91). Here, I elaborate her core ideas to detail a template for what constitutes a specifically “cultural” trauma.
5. As the term “trauma” weaves its way across disciplines, at times it seems it can become indistinguishable from the PTSD criteria: someone is traumatized only if s/he has PTSD, specifically symptoms of dissociation and repetition, which seem to be the disorder's most often emphasized features. However, PTSD is supposed to categorize a related set of pathological responses to a traumatic stressor, which suggests that the originating event and its effects, though at times conflated, are in fact two different things. This is

an important distinction since it preserves the sense that an event can be understood as horrifically disruptive even if its survivors happen to manage to cope effectively, or even just differentially, in its aftermath. Theory within psychology has addressed the dynamics of traumatic impact beyond the confines of the official PTSD diagnosis. First, Fullerton et al. (2003) point out that PTSD is not the only, nor even the most common, “trauma-related disorder,” citing “depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and increased substance use” among the other susceptibilities that extreme events can trigger (6). Pfefferbaum (2003) echoes this corrective, which she views as particularly salient when attempting to assess indirect victimhood via the media (185). Sprang (2003) specifies that terrorism, by intention, is a traumatic occurrence; however, not everyone reacts in the same way (134–135). These reactions include, but are not limited to, PTSD and other anxiety disorders, “mood disorders, substance misuse disorders and disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified (DESNOS)” (137), as well as complicated bereavement over sudden, unexpected death (140–141).

6. Interestingly, the fundamental assumptions outlined by psychologist Janoff-Bulman—the world is just and meaningful and the self is worthy—resonate strongly with the dominant US cultural value as articulated through the American Dream, that there is a causal, predictable, and ethical link between what people do and what they deserve/earn.
7. As Kellner (2010) points out, “Serious amounts of money are invested in the production of films and television, so they must resonate with audiences and often anticipate what people are thinking about, fantasizing, or yearning for” (39). Dwelling primarily on film, Kellner’s assessment of how that form of representation can provide critical insight into its contemporary historical context has relevance for other kinds of mass-distributed popular culture.
8. In a review of post-September 11 revisions in thinking, psychologists Gold and Faust (2002) note, “Suddenly, we are now confronted with the potential for a different type of catastrophic situation that is vastly greater in both scope and duration” than earlier crises such as the Oklahoma City bombing (4).
9. Any overview of contemporary theories of “cultural trauma” would evidence this area of study’s interdisciplinary embeddedness.

The following provide much more extensive background into the term's theoretical roots: Judith Herman (1992) traces "trauma" within psychiatric theory and practice, while Karyn Ball (2000) outlines its institutionalization within the humanities as "cultural trauma" and Roger Luckhurst (2008) conducts a genealogy to address its multidisciplinary histories and trajectories, reasoning that trauma breaches borders not only as a lived experience (3) but also as an area of study (4), including psychiatry, literature, cultural studies, medicine, and law. All refer to trauma's modern origins in the nineteenth century with intensifying interest through successive twentieth-century wars, as well as domestic American political struggles.

10. Barker (2011) draws on these concepts from Williams for his approach to film analysis (165–169).
11. Similarly, Kaplan and Wang (2004) regard trauma as historically situated and contextualized, with cultural causes and consequences (1–22).
12. Interestingly, a 2009 United Kingdom survey reported that eighty-two percent of those polled could remember September 11 in detail—in contrast to sixty-five percent who could remember the birth of their first child and fifty-eight percent who could recall the July 7, 2005, London bombings in similar detail (Barrett 2009).
13. Researchers were careful to distinguish qualitatively between the diagnosable disorder of PTSD, prevalent among those with more direct experiences of trauma, and normal reactions to a crisis, evident among those more distant from the traumatic event (Schuster et al. 2007, 33).
14. Sensations and circumstances in later years that resonated with the original trauma could still produce acute discomfort. For example, in April of 2009, a military-authorized photo shoot unannounced to the public of a Boeing 747 (used for Air Force One) and an F-16 fighter jet flying low over Lower Manhattan frightened witnesses mindful of September 11. Offices were evacuated, and the White House Military Office ultimately apologized for the disturbance (Eyewitness News 2009). On the other hand, also in 2009, in what came to be known as the "miracle on the Hudson," pilot Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger successfully crash-landed on the Hudson River a passenger-filled US Airways Airbus A320 after a flock of birds shut down both engines upon take-off. All aboard

- survived. News reports acknowledged that, had the plane actually crashed, the psychological devastation would have been compounded by resemblances to September 11 (MSNBC.com Staff and News Service Reports 2009).
15. Interestingly, Casebeer and Russell (2005) advocate a counterterrorism strategy based on narratives that counter or disrupt the stories that terrorist groups use to organize, recruit, act, and justify their actions, while also attending to how narratives construe American action (see also de Graaf 2009; Jacobson 2009; Leuprecht et al. 2009; Quiggin 2009).
 16. For example, Caruth (1996), in the field of literary theory, and LaCapra (2001), in the field of historiography, theorize predominantly from the premise of missing or lost experience and its inevitable, persistent recurrence as *the* characteristic dynamic of trauma. This emphasis can inhibit recognition of manifest traumatic after-effects that apparently fully acknowledge and expressly respond to specific instances of cultural disruption.
 17. Hall (1981) regards popular culture as the site of both “containment and resistance” (228) since people are not merely passive dupes to cultural production (232).

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Popular Press Oral Histories of September 11

INTRODUCTION: INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, AND TERROR

This project's introduction has intertwined theoretical premises of cognitive psychology with those of cultural studies to articulate a world socially constructed through dominant narratives. These dominant narratives rely on certain, fundamentally cohering assumptions—assumptions whose critical role in rendering the world comprehensible becomes starkly apparent when crisis violates them. What follows such a crisis—such a cultural trauma—is recalibration of a narrative understanding of the world in response to the now newly acknowledged, although perhaps always already-present, conditions that the trauma has exposed. In relation to September 11, 2001, core US beliefs in optimism, self-determination, and belief in a just world—good outcomes, or happy endings, for the good people who deserve them—met contradiction, rending open possibilities for questions about, revisions in, and alternatives to those core beliefs.

With this chapter, this study begins in earnest the way that narrativization of September 11 began: with stories told by the witnesses and survivors who encountered the events firsthand. Following immediately after the plane crashes and continuing long afterward, people would tell one another where they were when they first learned what was happening, regardless of however distant they might have been from the actual crash sites.¹ Yet, in keeping with a cultural tendency to prize direct expe-

rience and eyewitness accounts (Sturken 1997, 255; White 2004, 306), witness and survivor reports offered especially compelling perspectives. As Randall (2011) recalls, such stories “provided commentators with empirical evidence to begin to formulate what was happening at the time and then in the bewildering aftermath.” In fact, “This profound disparity between the lived experiences of those ‘on the ground’ and the vast audience watching is a dominant theme in the ‘Literature of Terror’ and has been one of the most discussed discourses post 9/11” (2). Scholars have noted the dominance of firsthand accounts within initial narrativizations of September 11 (Breithaupt 2003, 73–74; Kandel 2003, 187–188; Randall 2011, 2). Däwes (2011) situates popular press oral histories within these first narrative offerings that largely featured nonfiction and “claims to authenticity” (29), speculating that such stories offered “mimetic and straightforward reproductions of a seemingly stable material reality” (32) in the wake of shaken presumptions about this kind of existential stability. In effect, nonfictional accounts appeared first, with a delayed emergence of fictional representation. With the implicit narrative arc of ordinary daily American life manifestly disrupted, the attempt to understand that disruption and the new world it seemed to have augured began with individuals closest to the disruption and its aftermath sharing with others what they knew.

Importantly, this disruption derived from the specific circumstances attending a particular kind of violence—terrorism—presenting the terms within or against which the violation might be construed. Acts of terror can feel both inescapably intimate and incomprehensibly arbitrary, with the individuals who endure and interpret lasting harm frequently not themselves the specifically intended targets. Indeed, terrorism proves effective to the extent that it can disproportionately exploit horrifying actions against smaller groups to alter the attitudes and behaviors of much larger populations who identify in some way with those smaller groups and their plight (see Breckenridge and Zimbardo 2007, 116–118).² In this sense, on September 11, an individual’s harm was incurred by his/her connection—no matter how secure or tenuous, assured or conflicted—to the larger, targeted collectivity of the United States. Accordingly, the hijackings of September 11, first and frequently depicted through the stories that individuals have related to one another, have generated complex interactions of personal injury and cultural context that foreground how individuals interrelationally come to understand the world and their place within it.

Here, I examine how popular press oral histories formed part of the earliest attempts at reflection about September 11 on a mass scale. Such narratives showcase fears about personal safety and feelings of helplessness under conditions that inextricably link the individual's fate with the targeting of a national community. Specifically, three oral history collections produced for mass consideration have been overtly promoted as documenting history through the testimonies of "ordinary people" who witnessed the September 11 attacks in person: *New York Times* journalist Dean E. Murphy's 2002 *September 11: An Oral History*; former *New York Daily News* gossip columnist Mitchell Fink and his wife Lois Matthias's 2002 *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*; and writer, actor, and Drew University Theater Arts instructor Damon DiMarco's 2007 *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11*.³ Although these books do not feature entirely the same kinds of stories—for example, some include perspectives from the Pentagon or from Ground Zero recovery and support services, and others do not—each collection does include anecdotes of how survivors escaped from the World Trade Center's vicinity before or during its destruction. Also, all of these texts' front-cover illustrations—even those that also mention other sites—in some way incorporate twin tower imagery, manifesting the World Trade Center as their dominant concern. At the same time, each publication also connects readers' recollections—likely formed through that day's extensive media coverage, which also focused on Lower Manhattan—to these "at-the-scene" reports. Additionally, the assembled tales evoke tensions between victimization and valor that, cumulatively and in spite of framing to the contrary, tend to accentuate danger and loss over safety and triumph. Recurring themes of inscrutable fate and no-win scenarios trouble the rhetoric of voluntary sacrifice and heroism that has figured within other mainstream characterizations of September 11 and, indeed, deep-seated traditions of optimistic and even triumphant US discourse.

By presenting such a publicly available and commonly accessible resource for shaping a communal September 11 history, this core set of stories offers a fruitful site for exploring mediations between individual and collective meaning disruption and reconstruction. In particular, I assess how these narratives supplement readers' memories of that day and anticipations of their own futures with professedly veridical tales of what has been, and continues to be, at stake for everyone. Given the respect generally accorded eyewitness historical testimony and the respect these texts explicitly claim for their assembled testimonies, I evaluate how the

arbitrary yet intimate suffering these oral histories recount wield credible authority about what constitutes September 11. Ultimately, I consider how these books' anecdotes' persistent depictions of vulnerability and powerlessness complicate how an initially incredible and incomprehensible crisis can become credible and intelligible by fostering, instead of a satisfyingly happy and heroic resolution to each recounting, a common radical unsettlement about personal safety and agency that foreshadows the pre-occupations to persist as a cultural trauma throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century.

NARRATIVE, TRAUMA, AND ORAL HISTORY

When discussing the historiography of the Holocaust, a historical trauma which Miller and Tougaw (2002), among others, have affirmed has established the discourse on trauma within history and literature (4), historian James Young (1988) places history and interpretation in a hermeneutical circle, or feedback loop. He explains that participants in any given historical event come to that event with preexisting worldviews—a familiar story of the way things work—and those preexisting worldviews shape how they interpret and therefore how they act toward and within that event, while it is happening. Moreover, later narration of the event not only necessarily reflects the interpretations that guided earlier actions and resulted in particular outcomes but also incorporates worldviews contemporary to the time of narration and generates the material for revised worldviews that will shape future interpretation and action (2–5). This is one way to characterize how narratives not only represent cultural selves and worlds, they in fact produce cultural selves and worlds.

Indeed, it is the narratively produced, culturally intelligible self and world that traumatic events shatter and expose as contingent and vulnerable—and also which recovery seeks to restore. However, traumatic conditions pose considerable challenges for narration, troubling its ability to effect such recovery. After all, how do you tell a meaningful story about an occurrence that has shattered your foundations for all coherence? How do you make others understand that which you yourself still wrestle to grasp? Over time, these dilemmas have echoed through diverse survivor accounts of trauma. At the same time, though, in whatever form and however fractured, these narratives also mediate between survivors or witnesses and their listeners, readers, or viewers, working toward fresh significations about what the event means, whom it affects, and why it matters.

Narrative fosters through interpretation the conversion of traumatic experience into new individual and collective meanings and identities, always through a dynamic negotiation with what a narrator is able to express and what his/her audience is prepared to apprehend.

In considering how the story of September 11 is told, Ann Cvetkovich (2003) has urged “resisting the momentum of the culture industry, which is eager to tell a story that glorifies heroes and stresses national unity... [so] that its many and heterogeneous meanings...will be displaced by a more singular and celebratory story” (61). She envisions post-September 11 narrativization as responsively evoking the lived experience of trauma through complex, disruptive, and troubling, rather than simple, orderly, and conciliatory, storytelling approaches. Cautiously, then, Cvetkovich looks toward oral history collections as popular modes for inclusively memorializing not only what happened on September 11 but also how that day and the people whom it has affected are rooted in specific histories and directed toward channeled, though not fated, futures (63–65).⁴ However, while she values the opportunity oral histories afford to “break out of that potentially obsessive focus” on the day’s lived horror to consider instead meaning-making in its wake (65), I look to those popular oral histories that do dwell on the immediacy of horror. Regarding new historicism’s uses of anecdotes, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (2000) reference how the non-contextualized in historical writing signals the contingencies that mark the “real,” the not-yet-fully narrated intruding on the well-organized, authoritative rendering (49–59). Such stories, recounting abrupt intrusions in the continuing flow of personal and communal histories, can conjure the intensities of subjective, volitional, and ethical crises permeating the immediate wake of September 11 that help to determine what kinds of subsequent meaning-making are possible, likely, feared, and preferred.

Yet, while historiography generally is concerned with factually grounded interpretations and representations, the process of oral history is inherently subject to human error even under the most rigorous methodological conditions, at times resulting in confused, misinterpreted, or forgotten facts. However, to complement the anecdotal intensity that oral histories of horror communicate, this process can offer the historical record-enhanced insight into how individuals encounter and understand events, informing fact-based interpretations and representations with subjective perspectives of what it means to live through those “facts,” or historical events (Thomson 1999, 291). By effectively bracketing historical fact in

favor of subjective perspective, oral history assumes a phenomenological orientation (see Kirby 2008). After all, participants cannot know and act omnisciently; they can know and act only within the context and limits of their respective positioning (Portelli 1997, 85). In this sense, oral history need not demonstrate flawless factuality because what it offers, that factually oriented documentation does not, is the opportunity to understand an event's human impact. Such an impact, as evidenced by these subjective perspectives, includes individuals' senses—however accurate or inaccurate—as an occurrence unfolds of what is happening and how it might affect them, leading to their choices of whether and how to act from that time forward.

As it turns out, readers of oral histories likewise occupy circumscribed points of view, contoured not only by what their respective lives prepare them to understand but also by the perspectives the oral histories themselves provide. For oral history to communicate human weight and value, Portelli (1997) views as significant “less...the reconstruction of the average experience, than...the subjective projection of imaginable experience: less by what materially happens to people, than by what people imagine or know *might* [sic] happen. This horizon of possibilities defines the range of a socially shared subjectivity” (86–87). In this sense, what matters is not whether others actually experience what an oral history participant narrates, or whether an oral history somehow “objectively,” “accurately,” and “comprehensively” documents some past event, but whether others recognize the possibility that such things could happen, perhaps even to them. Portelli explains, “Oral history, then, offers less a grid of standard experiences than a horizon of shared possibilities, real or imagined” (88). Consequently, narratives that appeal to experience not only uniquely expose information critical to evaluating an event's human effects, such as suffering, but they can also foster a powerful, multilayered connection between narrator and reader, with the reader imagining not only a common history but perhaps also a common vulnerability with the narrator. This points to how oral history can evoke a historical event's human dimensions, risks, and consequences, even when those assembling the oral histories (in the case of the three collections considered here) have unclearly or unevenly followed methodological conventions for preserving as much as possible the integrity of the eyewitness' voice.

Accordingly, oral history accounts not only impart subjective narratives that contribute to an understanding of history but also provoke responsive alternate scenarios wherein others envision their own subjective—as likely

to be divergent as resonant—participation in the narratives’ recounted decisions, actions, and effects. In this way, oral histories provide a site for complex meaning formations generated through interactive engagement among narrators, narratives, and readers while manifesting and performing culturally salient values and practices. In effect, then, oral history—and specifically, these September 11 oral histories—can serve as technologies of memory, offering personal stories as sites for public negotiation regarding what those personal stories might mean for the larger community within which they are situated.

“WE ARE ALL AMERICANS?”

In the September 13, 2001, edition of France’s newspaper of record *Le Monde*, editor Jean-Marie Colombani declared, “We are all Americans.” This transnational sentiment of solidarity seemed to echo the stunned rallying characterizing immediate public reactions within the United States. But, as Colombani’s article itself indicates, what any postcrisis invocation of community might mean (and conversely, what firm rejections of any such solidarity might imply) depends complexly on what exigencies it recognizes and what purposes it might serve. Within the United States, the conscious recording of and engagement with this event as history began instantly with news media coverage, when commentators during live broadcasts struggled to contextualize within journalistic conventions developments they considered shockingly unprecedented and personally affecting.⁵ Not long after that day, numerous organizations began formally soliciting explicitly for the benefit of current and future generations’ eyewitness accounts and the reflections of anyone else who wanted to comment on how that day affected them, regardless of whether or not they were present at or in any way directly connected to any of the crash sites. These assorted projects evince a sense of September 11 as a communal event, confronted by individuals whose separate, unique experiences collectively generate a common significance for larger communities, even one defined as broadly as “Americans.”

I mention first only a sample of the larger-scale endeavors. The American Folklife Center began on September 12, 2001, to organize for the Library of Congress the September 11, 2001, Documentary Project, an online assemblage of audio, video, graphic, and written reactions to September 11 “from Americans and others.” According to the project’s overview, “This collection captures the voices of a diverse ethnic, socio-

economic, and political cross-section of America during trying times and serves as a historical and cultural resource for future generations.” From September 7 to October 26, 2002, the Library of Congress presented a formal exhibition, “Witness and Response: September 11 Acquisitions at the Library of Congress,” displaying artifacts amassed partly from the public at large during the year after the attacks. The September 11 Digital Archive, which includes images as well as stories submitted online by the general public, is also now affiliated with the Library of Congress (Brier and Brown 2011). In addition, since 2005, the nonprofit organization StoryCorps, which facilitates brief oral history-oriented conversations between people who know each other and who want to record each other’s personal histories, has pursued a September 11 Initiative to honor every person killed in the attacks of February 26, 1993 and September 11, 2001. Both the Library of Congress and the National September 11 Memorial and Museum at the World Trade Center (whose website has links to its own set of oral histories) have archived the interviews produced through the StoryCorps process, as well as the independently funded documentary *Project Rebirth*, which annually revisited nine individuals directly affected by September 11 to chronicle the grieving process over time. Also, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History September 11 exhibit, “September 11 Bearing Witness to History,” initiated on September 11, 2002, “emphasized each person—whether a visitor to the exhibit or an individual featured in the exhibit—as a singular ‘witness’” (Fried 2006, 390). Like the Library of Congress-affiliated collections, this exhibit regards “average” people as witnesses to and participants in the historical production of September 11, both as originators of historical narratives and artifacts and as active interlocutors with those materials.

Columbia University’s September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project—one of five Oral History Research Office efforts related to September 11—has sponsored hundreds of life history interviews to create an archive that reflects the widely divergent implications of that day and its aftereffects, specifically beyond the bounds of official or institutionalized discourse (Columbia University Libraries Oral History Research Office). According to Mary Marshall Clark (2002), project co-director with Peter Bearman, “The project’s purpose is to understand whether the catastrophe and its aftermath constitute a turning point in the lives and imaginations of those both directly and indirectly affected” (570). As Clark notes, “For most people, the interviews represented an

opportunity to try to make sense of what was senseless where there was apparently no analogy...[T]hose we interviewed described a search for meaning that began with stories of survival of the September events but continued to define a social response weeks and months afterwards.” For many, “September 11 still stands outside history as we know it” as those it has affected in complex and multiple ways continue to construct its ultimate meaning(s) through narrative (576).⁶ These characterizations resonate with how trauma narratives frequently function. Through storytelling, worldview expectations and explanations disrupted by trauma can reconstitute, more finely attuned to newly perceived conditions and circumstances. Like the collections mentioned above, this project has expressly and critically depended upon contributions from “ordinary” people—those without any particular qualifications other than having lived through that day.

Indeed, with the invitation to participate not only extended ostensibly to all but also intentionally in some cases to a “diverse...cross-section” of “Americans and others,” such efforts underscore a view of history-making as multivocal and broadly construed. In many cases, any subsets within the collections are characterized by relationship to the event as it unfolded—for example, by distinguishing “family members” from “rescue workers”—instead of by social categorization, such as race, religion, or citizenship. In these instances, although contributors do seem to vary in age, race, class, and other ways, the depth and breadth of the aspirational multivocality is difficult to assess; often, only when a photo is attached to a storyteller (“Voices of 9.11” 2012) do identifying qualities beyond a name become readily apparent. Yet, while other collections do exist that target more specific concerns—ranging from advocacy for justice in the context of post-September 11 security measures (“Acting Patriotic Interviews” 2002) to the Truther movement (Griffin 2006; 911Research.com 2009)—the underlying impulse explicitly articulated by the most extensive collections’ self-descriptions evidences a prevalent view of September 11 history as the evocation of disparate experiences on common sites of meaning formation, a field of opportunity for the individual struggle with that day’s horrors to become communally relevant. In aggregate, a discourse emerges of shared struggle over a shared loss, with some differentiation according to relative closeness to the events, but without emphasis on differing social positions, such as that generated by racial or religious identity—even though such elements prove salient to differing experiences of struggle and loss post-September 11.

POPULAR PRESS ORAL HISTORIES

This potential for generating collective histories of September 11 from individuals' stories sets the context for first-person accounts published through the popular press in the early 2000s, before the Columbia archives would become publicly accessible and certainly on a substantially larger scale of distribution. Such first-person accounts abound, from widow memoirs to oral histories of specific populations like young journalists trying to cover the news at the crash sites. However, three collections explicitly profess themselves to be recording history in the form of "ordinary-person" eyewitness testimonies that link readers' recollections—likely formed as media viewers from afar—to more authoritative, "on-the-ground" reports of those who directly encountered the September 11 attacks. In 2002, Doubleday produced Murphy's *September 11: An Oral History* and Regan Books produced Fink and Matthias's *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*. In 2004, Revolution Publishing first released DiMarco's *Tower Stories: The Autobiography of September 11th*, which Santa Monica Press revised and updated for a 2007 release as *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11*. Although these books do not feature entirely the same kinds of oral histories, I focus on what they all do include: anecdotal narratives—concise, informal excerpts from the larger thread of ongoing life—of how World Trade Center office workers, building employees, rescue personnel, area residents, and passersby escaped from the towers' vicinity before or during their collapse. This core set of stories bounded by a singular time, place, and event but complicated by multiple subject voices and orientations contributes to the attempt to render the World Trade Center's highly visible and initially incredible and incomprehensible crisis an increasingly credible and intelligible shared experience.

Consciousness of how individual stories can inform collective memory formations infuses each book's self-presentation, cueing readers to consider these narratives as the raw data of history and their own reading practice as part of history-in-the-making. For example, the front book cover characterizes Murphy's (2002) offerings as "Real Stories from Ordinary People" and its back jacket describes the book as "The first and only oral history of September 11 that presents people from all walks of life...[whose] vignettes capture the grief, rage, and fear that gripped the nation—and offer an intimate, inspiring look at the strengths that enabled us to move on." This coupling of "ordinary" survivors' ordeals and a "nation's" emotions, between "intimate" stories and a nebulously

inclusive “us” who can draw on such stories to “move on,” connects personal involvement with community conceptions of that day. Specifically, individual survivors are portrayed as embodying the shock that “gripped the nation” that day as well as the “strengths” that allowed those shocked others also to survive. This portrayal prepares readers to regard survivors as people just like them whose eyewitness testimony provides unique access to what actually happened at the World Trade Center but also, in doing so, clarifies what happened to readers themselves when witnessing events from afar. Similarly, while Fink and Mathias’s (2002) book title urges, “Never Forget,” its back cover claims, “This concert of voices shows, as never before, the heart-breaking grief and slow, but uplifting, healing process that the people of this nation have experienced individually and as one.” Again, the personal and the communal are figured as interchanging to articulate history through the edifying, palliative bond of storytelling.

Of the three texts, DiMarco’s (2007) book most vividly and self-consciously situates itself as an artifact and mechanism of historical production. While back cover descriptions term the collection a “literary time capsule” in the “tradition of Studs Terkel” that “eternally preserves a monumental tragedy in American history through the voices of the people,” its front cover points to a foreword by 9/11 Commission Chairman Thomas Kean, according bona fides to the book cover claims as historical documentation of September 11. In that foreword, Kean (2007) traces the collection’s effort to “allow...our American people to speak for themselves” to the Great Depression’s Federal Writer’s Project’s preservation of slave narratives, which he characterizes as “part of our cultural body of evidence against what was, and an inspiration toward a brighter future for what might be” (12–13). Following this tradition, he writes, “I hope this book remains in print for a very long time to come because everyone should read it. Our children should read it...We must ground ourselves in the reality of our pain if we have any hope of moving forward.” To his use of the plural “we” and “our” to summon a collective effort at history formation, transmission, and redress, he adds, “I invite you this instant to clear your mind and think back for a moment. Where were you that day” (13)? After all, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, he suggests, “a new door was opened between us and we were able to share in a quiet secret that everyone suddenly knew—that we are all, in our own way, survivors. Move forward we must. For we are Americans. This is our story” (14). In this way, Kean’s foreword explicitly elides the individual survivor narrator and an American community readership, blending the two as a

single body united in the task of making sense of a shared horror, with the narrator contributing the story that educates the reader not only about the narrator's experience but also about the reader's own.

September 11: An Oral History book reviewer Jonathan Mahler (2002) acknowledges from his encounter with Murphy's collection this elision between survivors and a larger community, writing, "Even for those of us who weren't downtown when the planes struck, these oral histories trigger certain recollections, collective emotional muscle memories." He highlights the imaginative relations between survivors and others, between others and the event, that these stories enable, recalling, "Reading these accounts, you can't help wondering what you would have done." On each of these books' product Web pages, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) provides room for customer reviews. Purchasers can post comments anonymously, tagged only by self-selected usernames and locations that indicate nothing about the commenter's identifying characteristics. For this reason, these comments' value and quality are limited within a recognition that they could come from anyone for any reason, from an editor's family and friends wanting to boost sales to disgruntled competitors wanting to reduce this particular product's appeal. However, they do occasion an intriguing sampling of whether any readers besides Mahler consider the texts as involving them in the historical production of September 11, or at least whether any comments further promote this attitude toward the texts.

Interestingly, many entries do signal this approach. According to a customer identified as Bill Baker (2004), writing about DiMarco's book, "Oral history is the purest form of history available," an opinion underscoring the authority oral history wields. Regarding Murphy's book, Iconophoric (2002) writes, "The stories in this particular book have become the 'real' September 11, 2001, to me as a distant observer, that is, the virtual physical space my imagination inhabits when I think of those buildings and the people and the day." For Iconophoric, these narratives have complemented or even supplanted his or her own recollections. To a much greater extent, the comments for Fink and Mathias's book reflect an incorporation of these oral histories as primary, privileged histories in which readers nevertheless participate. For example, CookieMonster (2006) writes, "it is something that Americans should read to know the true suffering and heroism that happened on that day. I did not know anyone in NYC personally, but I feel now after 5 years that I really understand the magnitude of this event." ideas [sic] equate (2005) writes, "It's almost an American obligation to read these personal accounts and ponder the

gravity of that day for those who were there.” Daniel Jolley “darkgenius” echoes the notion of “American obligation to read,” and notes in 2005, “I have only recently been going back and reading about 9/11—suddenly, I finally felt ready to revisit what happened that day. I am learning that the personal tragedy and horror was much more extensive than I realized.” He adds, “I was actually most interested in the stories of regular people who lived through the events...those are the stories I can most easily identify with, especially when I ask myself how I would have reacted in their situation.” Similarly, A Customer (October 1, [2002a](#)) writes, “I was nowhere near NY, but I think we all experienced a death that morning. I was compelled to read this book to somehow empathize with those who perished and those who survived. I was ‘safe’ on the west coast, but I wanted to know what my fellow Americans went through that day.” Another reviewer listed as A Customer (September 24, [2002b](#)) writes, “Most of us will never experience the horror, terror, and physical calamity that these people witnessed and/or suffered themselves. Just reading these stories did such a good job of putting me in those moments.” Similar sentiments, marking the oral histories as authoritative perspectives to which Americans must defer to understand what “truly” occurred, suffuse other postings as well. They construct the narratives as technologies through which readers position themselves in a gesture of responsible community as potential or vicarious survivors to refine their knowledge of what happened on September 11 and how it should be remembered.

Importantly, however, even though marketing has entitled each text an “oral history” and has emphasized the legitimacy such a term connotes, none adhere rigorously to transparent scholarly conventions of oral history practice. As the product of communication between an eyewitness and an interviewer, with the interviewer wielding powerful analytical and distributive authority over this communication, oral history is implicitly a mediated form of the first-person account. In other words, what people encounter when they read, watch, or listen to an oral history can seem to be statements purely and only about what an eyewitness has experienced. However, an oral history actually depends on what that eyewitness could know at the time, and what s/he now remembers and tells, as well as what an interviewer prompts, hears, and selectively records and reports, all dynamic elements that complicate any notion of a single, true, incontrovertible testimony, yet all elements that can remain deceptively undifferentiated once an oral history enters circulation in its final, polished form. Moreover, although standards exist to render this mediation transparent

and manage its effects, the three September 11 collections considered here gloss over, to differing extents, important methodological concerns. Each addresses methodological issues in varying ways. In fact, Murphy (2002) notes in his introduction, “It is an oral history in the most general sense. The narratives are first-person accounts of that day, but they are not verbatim transcriptions of tape-recorded conversations.” Rather, he assembles “composites” from a variety of communications with his sources, while still maintaining an “uncompromising” commitment to accuracy (5). He prefaces each participant’s story with a name, occupation, and enough additional personal facts to set the stage for his or her subsequent recounting of September 11. At the same time, DiMarco (2007) explains in his introduction that the “stories you’re about to read are distilled from interviews conducted in the year following September 11, 2001”—although he notes that the 2007 edition includes updates to some participants’ stories as well—and that “great effort was made to capture the speaker’s inimitable tone, viewpoint, and rhythm of speech” (16). Therefore, it remains unclear, though likely, that these stories, presented as if in participants’ own words, are in fact again not verbatim transcriptions but rather editor-assembled abstracts of different interviews. DiMarco does provide contextual information, whether explicitly or inferentially, to identify speakers by name, age, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc. However, he supplies this information inconsistently in his prefaces to each account, which also feature other, somewhat arbitrary, background material such as whether someone “was a Yankees fan from the day he was born” (422). Similarly, Fink and Mathias’s (2002) participants are unevenly identified, with some but not all visible in undated photographs and all identified only by name, age, and occupation. Otherwise, Fink and Mathias primarily document only the emotional toll conducting these interviews has taken on them (1–5). On the whole, these approaches short-shrift to differing extents important methodological concerns relative to what would be required of academic publications.

As a result, in spite of each book’s claims to the legitimacy of first-hand descriptions, any differences between the eyewitness’s voice and that of the interviewer remain opaque. Nevertheless, such approaches would likely suffice for these popular press publications, which target general audiences interested in the emotional impact of September 11 stories, an interest that would probably overshadow investment in historiographical standards. In effect, these books can have their cake and eat it too, by invoking the deference typically granted eyewitness testimony without

completely taking the steps necessary to secure the parameters of that credibility. Such steps would have fostered a tenor of heightened professionalism that could have diminished the common-person, community-bonding tone on which these oral histories have based their appeal. But what kinds of history do these traumatic excerpts of ordinary life experience create and what kinds of community do they summon?

HISTORY AS CONFUSION, VULNERABILITY, AND DOUBT

Murphy, Fink and Mathias, and DiMarco all acknowledge within their collected September 11 oral histories elements of disarray, fear, and chance. Murphy's (2002) front jacket prompts readers' recognition of this commonality among the stories by stating, "About 3000 people lost their lives....Thousands more narrowly escaped, their survival a result of eerily prescient spur-of-the-moment decisions, acts of superhuman courage, the unfailing kindness of strangers, and, in some cases, fortuitous strokes of luck." Similarly, the back jacket refers to lifesaving "unlikely coincidences and quirks of fate." Mention of narrow escapes, eerie prescience, superhuman effort, the kindness of strangers, coincidence, pure luck, and fate evokes an utterly uncontrollable scenario for survivors, who appear in this way distinguished from the dead only tenuously through their judgment, choice, and action. Similarly, Fink writes in his part of a joint introduction, "The subject matter, after all, is without precedent. No one alive that day had any prior experience in dealing with events like these, and as a result many of the images described herein had never been imagined" (Fink and Mathias 2002, 4). Implicitly, then, this assortment of unimaginable and unprecedented experiences infuses these forms of historical documentation with confusion, vulnerability, and doubt. For Fink himself, who attests, "The world indeed changed on the morning of September 11" (1) and for Mathias, who recalls, "September 11 changed my life and was yet another turning point for me. Any and all illusions of control were shattered...Life as I knew it had changed" (Fink and Mathias 2002, 4–5), comprehensive conceptual dislocation was something they explored by interviewing survivors but felt for themselves as well. At the same time, Kean's (2007) preface to DiMarco's book directly addresses readers on the premise that they, like everyone else watching media coverage of the attacks, were during that time "wondering where your loved ones were. Wondering. Just wondering. You were scared. You were angry. You were vulnerable. We all were" (14). By asserting that "we all" shared reactions of wonder, fear, anger, and

helplessness, Kean joins the disturbed subjectivity and agency plaguing first-person encounters with challenges to subjectivity and agency for witnesses from afar. In effect, these characterizations imply that September 11 disrupted the ability to comprehend events and act within them productively not only for those “on the ground” whose stories testify to such disruptions but also for those across the country who read these stories to better understand what could or seemed to have happened to themselves.

Confusion permeates every account in these books. As unforeseen events unfold, eyewitness after eyewitness reports an inability to readily understand what is happening to them and around them. For example, Saravanan Rangaswamy (2002), an immigrant from India on his first day of work with Lehman Brothers, was still in the North Tower lobby when the first plane hit. He recalls,

I thought a bomb had gone off. Immediately, everyone around me started running toward the doors. I just followed them...I had only been at the World Trade Center twice before...so I didn't know my way around. I just followed the crowd. In less than a minute, I was about 50 yards from the building, where I stopped and tried to figure out what had just happened. (37–38)

Similarly, Gerry Gaeta (2002), a Port Authority architect on the 88th floor of the North Tower—and therefore among the few closest to the impact zone to survive—remembers, “something ripping through the building... at that moment, I didn’t even know about an airplane. My first reaction was that it was an earthquake. Then I thought of a bomb” (49). Port Authority Police Captain Anthony R. Whitaker (2002), featured in both Murphy’s and Fink and Mathias’s books, was the commanding officer at the World Trade Center. He was in the complex’s shopping mall when the first plane hit and he began hearing roars and seeing fireballs and people on fire coming from the North Tower lobby (23). He explains, “It just occurred to me that whatever was going on—and I still didn’t know what that was—was beyond my ability as a commanding officer of that facility to do anything about it” (24). These eyewitnesses range from someone relatively far from the impact and totally unfamiliar with the buildings to someone near the impact and familiar with the buildings to someone whose professional responsibility was to ensure safety throughout those buildings. From every one of these compromised subject positions, knowledge of what was occurring immediately around them and what

was directly affecting their life chances remained inaccurate, misleading, or entirely absent. The very worlds these survivors inhabited had become inscrutable at a moment of the highest stakes, when their ability to interpret and navigate their place in their environment—the most basic threshold of subjectivity—would mean the difference between life and death.

This compromised subjectivity, under circumstances dominated by horrific violations of human bodies, produces intense awareness of vulnerability. David Kravette (2002), a Cantor Fitzgerald employee—a financial services firm that became indelibly linked with substantial loss of life on September 11—left the 105th floor of the North Tower to meet clients in the lobby just before the first plane crashed into the floors below his office, cutting off all escape routes. He notes the happenstances that meant for him averted death,

They [his visitors] were running late, obviously. They forgot their ID. But they also went to 2 World Trade Center first. They went into the wrong building and waited on line for five minutes, and discovered they were in the wrong building. Had they gone into the right building, I would have gone down, signed them in, and went back up with them. I would have either perished in the elevator, or we would have been back upstairs. Either way, I would have been dead. (45)

For John Abruzzo (2002), a Port Authority accountant whose quadriplegia renders him reliant on a wheelchair, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing signaled how difficult an escape from danger in the towers could be for him. His six-hour descent that day was “labor intensive,” requiring assistance from multiple fellow employees, who first tried to move him down in his wheelchair, and then resorted to using a stretcher (125). As a result of this ordeal, by 2001, the World Trade Center supplied him instead with an evacuation chair that could glide rather than bounce down the stairwell (126). On September 11, fellow accountants assisted him out of the towers in the greatly shortened time frame that day permitted for a safe exit. Of his helpers, he says, “It’s impossible to describe what they did for me. It was a tremendous thing. If this had been like it was for me in ’93, I’m sure none of us would have made it, and possibly no one would have known what they attempted to do for me” (127). Like Kravette, his comments reflect his sharp awareness of the precarious turn events took for him and his work associates. Similarly, Florence Engoran (2007), who was five months pregnant and a new hire at a securities firm on the 55th

floor of the North Tower, fully recognized threat and safety as ultimately contingent on factors beyond any personal choice and control. She recalls, “I wasn’t exactly in the peak of health, I’d been having morning sickness. And I was thinking, what if I pass out? No one’s gonna help me” (50). Yet co-workers did assist her down the stairs and out of the building (50–54). However, she recalls, “my other source of guilt I have—there were so many handicapped people left in the building. They couldn’t get out. No one helped them. And they died” (57). Although Abruzzo’s story offers a positive view of how human beings can help one another under conditions of a shared threat, Engoran’s recollection suggests that awareness of a shared threat can also lead to prioritizing self-preservation. However, all of these excerpts indicate an understanding of threat and safety on September 11 as ultimately contingent on factors beyond any individual’s choice and control.

Given their senses of distraught subjectivity and heightened vulnerability, eyewitnesses express profound doubts about their survival. Teresa Veliz (2002), who had just stepped off an elevator on the 47th floor of the North Tower when the plane crash knocked that elevator down to the ground, also managed to survive the tower’s collapse. She says, “I...have no idea how or why I made it out. That is what is most frightening now: Was I just lucky? I don’t think there is any special reason that I am here today, alive while so many others are not. But it is a question that I can’t quite get out of my mind” (15). Likewise, Alberto Bonilla (2007), at the time an aspiring actor originally from Honduras (164), wonders about his own luck. He had stopped to get breakfast in the World Trade Center shopping mall, but after realizing he didn’t have any money to make the purchase, he boarded a train and headed uptown to his temporary job at Morgan Stanley (165–166). He later thinks,

‘I didn’t have enough money to buy breakfast. And because of that, I didn’t have to wait on line. And because of that, I wasn’t directly under the Tower when the first plane hit. And all those people, those faces I can’t remember. I wasn’t with them when it happened. Did some of them die?’ And I’d missed everything because I didn’t have \$3.45 to my name....Shortly thereafter, this feeling started to set in and it took me a few days to realize what it was. Guilt. The guilt of being alive. (169)

As Herman and Janoff-Bulman explain regarding recovery from trauma, the notion of luck and the presence of guilt signal attempts to regain

feelings of control that the trauma has shattered. Without any apparent existential reasoning for why some lived and others died that day, many continue to grapple with the question: why am I still alive, and what does this mean? Through such oral history accounts evoking experiences of fractured subjectivity, agency, and responsibility that have been linked even to those who witnessed September 11 only from afar, these collections form a disrupted and unsettled form of historical documentation that registers not only individual ordeals but a communal crisis of cultural trauma.

Consistently for those who were in a position to witness the sight, the survivors in all of these oral history collections cite people jumping as compounding their dumbfounding, terror, and helplessness. Cathy Brown (2002), who was staying with her husband and children at the Marriott Hotel at the World Trade Center, was trying to leave the area with them when, she recalls, “A man in front of us stopped and pointed, saying ‘Oh my God! There are people falling out of the building!’” Although she says, “I didn’t stop to look” (107), she also then says, “I will never forget that man in the blue suit and red tie. I think of him as my angel in heaven. I know nothing about him but seeing him jump to his death touched a human instinct in me. I started screaming” (108). Fr. Paul Engel (2002), who was at the Marriott’s health club just before the first plane hit, and who narrowly escaped the burning engine fuel that poured into that pool from the North Tower crash, recalls, “I looked at the two burning buildings and saw things I can never forget. I could see little figures jumping to their death from the North Tower. I knew at that moment I had to get back there. I am a priest” (115). People jumping had formed part of the material dangers confronting those leaving the towers for safety and those approaching the towers for rescue operations, but it also clearly posed deeply troubling conceptual problems as well.

Borough of Manhattan Community College senior Kimberly Morales (2002) remembers,

I think I watched six people jump to their deaths. I kept thinking, What was going on in their minds? Would I be doing the same thing?...I thought about how their days had started, probably just like mine, how they woke up not knowing any of this would happen, how they said goodbye thinking they would be back home that night. And I thought about how I was watching them die. It was all really hard to swallow. (127)

Confronting this phenomenon of irremediable despair remains, as those who say they will “never forget” affirm, a compelling matter of complexity and endurance. Clearly, for Brown, Fr. Engel, and Morales, seeing these unknown people in extreme states of vulnerability fostered some kind of relational connection. For Brown, this meant feeling herself to have encountered an “angel” whose “death touched a human instinct.” For Fr. Engel, this meant a need to return to the crash site to provide spiritual comfort. For Morales, this meant consciously envisioning herself in their place. For all, this meant a calling, an impulse, of responsibility, to recognize and remember these figures and their plight. On the other hand, book reviewer Mahler’s (2002) sense of “collective emotional muscle memories” sparked by Murphy’s book specifically turned to “the anger, the desire for immediate revenge, but also that feeling of vulnerability.” For him, “A year later, it’s still the ones who jumped. Nothing else—not the planes slamming into the towers, not the buildings collapsing like sand castles, not the cloud of smoke and debris chasing through the streets of Lower Manhattan—is as profoundly disturbing as the image of people stepping out of skyscrapers and dropping to certain death.” Of all the dangers characterized within survivors’ oral histories in Murphy’s, Fink and Mathias’s, and DiMarco’s collections, perhaps this ordeal most fully embodies and provokes the confusion, vulnerability, and doubt wrought by the September 11 attacks.

CONCLUSION: INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, AND ACTION AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

Each of these oral history collections has focused on in-the-moment personal experiences of the September 11, 2001, attacks, particularly at the World Trade Center. In keeping with a common feature of trauma narratives, such accounts tend to be disjointed and decontextualized. But as noted in the review of oral history practice, such disjointed and decontextualized testimonies nevertheless serve as sites for collective meaning formations, and as noted in the overview of September 11 oral histories, the wake of those hijackings occasioned a wide variety of such testimonies through a number of organizations and institutions. Interestingly, while the shared concerns across these narratives aggregately destabilize mainstream celebrations of sentimentalized heroism and resilience, they also tend to omit any overt political commitments, never definitively identifying perpetrators or causes (which were largely unknown to sur-

vivors at the time of their crises) and therefore never advocating for any particular response. Instead, the notion seems remote that action of any kind could prove commensurate with the psychological exigencies these stories evoke. Yet, it is important to note that such exigencies—in which readers envision themselves as near- or potential-victims—do loom as fertile ground for appeals to extreme reaction as a match to such extreme conditions.⁷ Considering these popular press oral history accounts as technologies of memory at the volatile moment in US history of the immediate wake of September 11, what can these chronicles of disrupted senses of knowledge, safety, and control come to mean?

For Murphy's book reviewer Mahler (2002), "Mostly...there is darkness." However, [Amazon.com](#) commenter Inglip (2008) writes, "most stories are about the strength of the will to survive, the bond we share that allow us to care for perfect strangers, and amazing luck...[it] fosters an appreciation for life." Similarly, tricia (2002) writes, "You'll come away saddened, but most likely, inspired." Martin A. Hogan "Marty from SF" (2002) writes of *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*, "Every walk of life is spoken here and every voice is full of a human spirit we all share....It is therapy." Regarding DiMarco's book, avid reader (2007) writes, "It is very touching and inspirational as well." Nevertheless, such positive expressions of hope remained relatively few among customer responses, with most comments dwelling primarily on how each collection documents for them the historical horror of September 11.

Ultimately, Murphy, Fink and Mathias, and DiMarco reclaim their assembled stories as evidence of individual and collective courage, strength, and endurance. Murphy's (2002) front jacket describes the book as "at once a dramatic reminder of one of the most devastating events in the history of the nation and a tribute to the spirit of cooperation and the outpourings of empathy that marked that day for so many people in the United States and abroad." In fact, in his introduction he identifies his collection of oral histories as participating in the unevenly achieved effort at postcrisis healing. He explains that while some were still too troubled by their personal memories to discuss them publicly, let alone view their pasts as history, "For many of the people in this book, the process of sharing their experiences was a profound and moving one... Afterward, the opening up, the sharing of deep thoughts and anxieties, was seen by most of these people as healing" (6). Similarly, Fink and Mathias's (2002) back cover announces, "As these unforgettable stories reveal, many Americans transcended their own confusion and despair to help one another escape,

to offer one another kindness, and to affirm life in the face of catastrophe.” Likewise, Kean (2007) writes in his preface to DiMarco’s collection—again directly addressing his readers—“But after that initial shock passed, what did you do?...You hung on. You went back to work. You picked up the pieces” (14). Specifically, DiMarco (2007) designates his book as the way to move on, encouraging readers to use his text to educate their grandchildren about the history of September 11. He urges, “If we give our grandchildren free access to our history, maybe they’ll come up with better answers than we have. We might just save them a few mistakes. After all, what else are we here for” (17)? At the end of the book, a page thanking the preceding contributors is left otherwise more than half-blank and offered “as a place for you, the reader, to pause and reflect on the events of September 11, 2001” (527). In this way, the telling, the publishing, and the reading of these oral histories could become together instruments of meaning-making that render the cultural trauma of September 11 both individually and collectively recoverable, comprehensible, and amenable to future positive action. Yet, as counterpoint to this potentially inspiring outcome, DiMarco’s blank space, by remaining blank, is indicative of what each collection has asked of its readers in the early- to mid-2000s: that they recognize how much remains unresolved and write those parts themselves within the published pages.

NOTES

1. This phenomenon within casual social conversations lasted years. See Jarvis (2011) for a study of the WhereWereYou.org website for analysis of an online, open access forum for anyone around the world to post their stories of that day.
2. Howie (2013) asserts, “Witnesses are terrorism’s target audience” (12) and addresses the complexity, ambivalence, multivocality, and necessity of articulating witnesses’ accounts of historic, and particularly terrorist, events.
3. DiMarco’s (2007) book does stand out in some ways. Originally published in 2004 as *Tower Stories: The Autobiography of September 11th, 2001*, TODAY show book reviewers included it on their tenth-anniversary list of five “must-read” books about September 11 (Smith and Schindler 2011). CNN.com posted a feature on the collection that linked to a selection of its stories (Botelho 2005). Also, a robust product website evidences its unique reach by not-

- ing events related to the book, in particular plans to develop it into a play whose performance would help to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of September 11 in 2016 (Towerstories.org).
4. Cvetkovich (2011) uses Columbia University's September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project to consider the specific experience of Afghan Americans in a 2011 *Radical History Review* article.
 5. Gauthier (2015) points out that those reporting the news live on television largely knew no more than their viewers as events unfolded (82–83).
 6. In a 2011 *Radical History Review* article, Clark reports finding commonalities of meaning within these oral histories that tend to counter dominant narratives, primarily those sustained by the Bush administration.
 7. Literary theorist Duvall (2011) contends that President Bush exploited “broadly...experienced” trauma to generate support for his post-September 11 policies (153). Communication theorist Irom (2012) points to the state’s “appropriation” of the “impression” or meaning of September 11 (517–520). Psychologists Landau et al. (2004) assert—through Terror Management Theory (TMT)—that the salient fear of death provided fertile ground for supporting aggressive policies. Cultural theorist Melani McAlister (2002) observes that “the Bush administration...stress[ed] what many people in the United States already felt” (439), emphasizing a sense of shock at unprecedented events that could soften receptivity to unprecedented responses (440).

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Limning the “Howling Space” of September 11 Through Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*

INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE, FALLING, AND SEPTEMBER 11

In December of 2001, Don DeLillo wrote the *Harper’s Magazine* essay, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” and in 2007 he published the novel *Falling Man*, both of which consider the peculiar horrors of September 11. These two texts, appearing at the beginning and at the end of the time frame spanned by the oral history collections, trace a single author’s developing response to that day from non-fiction (DeLillo’s essay) to fiction (his novel). Like the oral history collections, these texts evoke continued unsettlement about survivors’ and victims’ arbitrary fates and the seemingly irresolvable moral quandaries that the day’s display of compromised subjectivity and agency underscored. In particular, *Falling Man* references by title and by other allusions the harrowing predicament of those trapped in the World Trade Center who faced the choice not of whether or not they would die, but only which type of certain death they would endure. Even six years later, that day’s events would remain sufficiently potent to position readers to

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consider such an invocation of historical memory in distinctly personal ways.¹ And so, like the oral history collections, this fictional engagement with September 11 presumes readers in the mid-2000s who share certain kinds of knowledge, anxieties, and unresolved feelings of vulnerability. Like those oral history collections, this work of fiction confounds simplistic notions of heroism or redemption, instead featuring characters and scenarios pervaded by uncertainty, insecurity, and loss.

However, unlike those collections, this novel appears late enough in the decade to have accrued enhanced anticipation about its political commitments. Bird (2007) sees an opportunity for critical distance from the by-then well-underway formal US reactions, arguing that “Fiction... frequently hint[s] at the necessity for a process of mourning and self-examination that the bullish, militaristic response of the US government seems determined to forestall” (561). For Gray (2011), “more than ever, Americans find themselves caught between the conflicting interests and voices that constitute the national debate” (18), with fiction facilitating readers’ entry into the ethical and political fray during a moment of transition and uncertain resolution (1–19). Däwes (2011) attributes to post-September 11 fiction substantial formal, critical, and political work (1–23). Likewise, Bizzini (2010) regards the “traumatological” text as an attempt “at analyzing how groups respond to what is considered as a common threat in a clearly defined historical moment in time and space.” Indeed, Bizzini argues that “DeLillo’s novel is an ambiguous text, a reflection in process that projects onto the reader the epistemological chaos, insecurity, and uncertainty of Western societies in the wake of 9/11” (41). While Rowe (2011) asserts that DeLillo contributes to a counterproductive tendency to domesticate “global problems” (134), Banita (2012) takes a different position:

[F]ar from enacting a turn away from politics, ethical engagement with and within literature can redirect the political away from the moralism of counterterrorist policies, expose its textual ‘fictional’ narrative, and assert the legitimacy of moral ambivalence, deliberation, and ambiguity in a culture whose postnational contours are rigidly molded around moral crusades and what George W. Bush would call decision points...[I]n attending to the moral discourses that proliferated after the September 11 attacks, fiction has sought to strike a balance between an ethics of witnessing and mourning on the one hand, and the need to challenge the abuse of moralism in the implementation of expedient political agendas on the other hand. (297–298)

Banita describes DeLillo as "cut[ting] against received notions of how we regard the pain of others, revealing, instead, how we learn to closely watch and internalize it on our own terms" (74). In effect, counter to arguments that representation dwelling on the individually traumatic aspects of September 11 thwarts productive political engagement, Banita envisions post-September 11 literature as open to ethical writing and reading practices, enabling readers to interrogate rather than affirm moral certainties.² In sum, literature can serve as a medium through which readers can actively assess the relationship between the precipitating moment of September 11 and their contemporary political circumstances.

This perceived opportunity for broader political critique notwithstanding, DeLillo's essay and his novel focus narrowly on the morning of September 11 as a critical narrative pivot. While subsequent developments, such as the War on Terror, are acknowledged, DeLillo primarily wrestles with understanding that particular day as a fateful intersection of inconsonant forces. He traces how individuals come to participate in politically meaningful outcomes, wittingly or unwittingly, against the scale of vastly larger historical trajectories that happen to coincide at portentous moments, such as the collision between plane and building. Specifically, he centers his novel around the profoundly intimate yet arbitrary, and also politically motivated, peril of those who jumped from the World Trade Center.

As noted in the previous chapter, the predicament of those who jumped posed a dominating horror of September 11 for witnesses and survivors.³ AP photographer Richard Drew's photograph of one of these victims has become iconic within this context. It frames with momentary and accidental aesthetic balance an unidentified man's otherwise completely uncontrolled fall against the backdrop of the North and South towers. In 2003, Tom Junod wrote an article for *Esquire* that contemplated the possible identity of the photograph's subject, but ultimately resolved that in his anonymity, the subject could actually stand for us all—that the suspension of fate within the image, the invisibility of causal circumstances and their inevitable consequences, occasioned for anyone viewing the image the prospect of imagining the horror this person was enduring and even imagining it for themselves. Junod wrote to respond to the effective censure of this and other similar pictures within the news media, surmising that this utmost vulnerability and its representation so completely violated cultural understanding, particularly compelling American narratives of heroism and redemption, that it could not be accommodated within

mainstream discourse. Indeed, while the previous chapter reviews the immediate outpouring of first-person narrative accounts, which included mention of those who jumped, visual portrayal of the act of jumping in-progress encountered outright opposition immediately after September 11, and such portrayals, as well as both the visual and audio traces of impact,⁴ remain delicate territory.

Junod's article helped to enable the picture, whose subject he had termed the "Falling Man," to resurface and the horrific plight of those who jumped to become part of the acknowledged and reflective common memory of September 11 (see Brian Anderson 2012, Leonard 2011, Levy 2014, Pompeo 2011, and Whitworth 2011).⁵ Art, culture, history, and literary theorists have since engaged the ethical and political issues raised by this man's falling as both a fact and a notion (see Anker 2011; Baelo-Allué 2011; Fitzpatrick 2007; Kirouac-Fram 2011; Kroes 2011; Mauro 2011; Muller 2009, 2010a, b; Nadel 2011; Orvell 2011; and Polatinsky and Scherzinger 2013), predominantly echoing Junod's concerns while advocating for the potential for compassion, both personal and political, that witnessing such utter helplessness could produce. After all, seeing or otherwise learning of those who jumped would prompt the question, "Why would they do that?" Answering such a question requires imaginative entry into these victims' visceral dilemmas and terrified psychic space. Similar to the popular press oral history accounts, this could provoke for viewers rumination on their own near- or potential- mortality, providing another instance through which the terror of September 11 endures and facilitating the posture from which ordinary US citizens might become more receptive to radical counteraction. Yet, it also could afford an opportunity for engagement with the Other at the outermost limits of intelligible experience.

In 2007, AMC's *Mad Men* debuted on television,⁶ depicting in its opening credits for a total of seven seasons a silhouetted businessman whose own office building crumbles around him as he enters a stylized freefall amid ad-laden skyscrapers. The show's fifth-season publicity campaign featured the same businessman in freefall against a blank backdrop, the posters looming at an enormous scale against the real-world backdrop of real-world New York skyscrapers. News media reported immediately about the unsettlement these 2012 advertisements created among New Yorkers viewing the image from the very city where eleven years earlier actual men and women had fallen from and among skyscrapers (Dunlap 2012; Russell 2012). In spite of the initially resolute lack of recognition within dominant culture, the plight of those who jumped and the idea of a Falling Man

has sufficiently permeated American consciousness to sustain a persistent sense of fear and vulnerability that can be used for, and resented for being used for, a television show about existential drift, unstable moralities, and the crises disrupting the status quo of 1960s America.⁷

Since such concerns have long informed Don DeLillo's fiction, I contextualize DeLillo's writings within the phenomenon of passionate contemporary (and largely disappointed) popular press expectations that his post-September 11 contributions would provide especially cogent analyses and interpretations of that day's attacks. Then, I move forward in my own assessment of what view of September 11 and its aftereffects his work might in fact be constructing by previewing his writings' underlying preoccupation with crisis persisting through time, particularly as evidenced by his first response to the hijackings, an essay whose title features the phrase, “the ruins of the future.” Next, I foreground how notions of fate permeate his novel *Falling Man*—whether relating to the onset of Alzheimer's disease, a suicide hijacker's preparations for his final mission, or a survivor's perpetual tempting of chance through gambling. I focus on these notions of fate to assess how these pervasive engagements with the prospect of inevitable endings for each of the book's prominent characters reinforce the sense of enduring and unavoidable crisis. In particular, I examine how these representations of fate insinuate that limited choice consistently constrains not only an individual's immediate circumstances but also the entire worldview orienting their life trajectories. At the same time, I explore how these representations point to an ultimate concern with mortality, the single inarguably universal human fate emblemized by the figure of the unidentified “falling man,” or World Trade Center victim jumping to his death. Accordingly, I evaluate how DeLillo's essay and novel weigh the possibility of death itself as the only sure common ground for ethical community in the wake of September 11, a possibility whose apparent complex and problematic implications are illustrative of ongoing disturbances in US cultural formulations of existential safety, ethics, and community.

SEPTEMBER 11 AS A ONCE AND FUTURE CRISIS IN DON DEILLO'S WRITINGS

In 2007, Tom Junod penned a review of *Falling Man* entitled, “The Man Who Invented 9/11.” In that piece, Junod argues that DeLillo “has been writing the post-9/11 novel for the better part of four decades, and his

pre-9/11 novel... *Underworld*, was prescient⁸ enough to put the looming towers on its cover, standing high and ready to fall.” Junod adds, “He has been insisting...that humanity has turned into a mass-organism, twitching with the plots and conspiracies hatched by loners desperate for connection, and so 9/11 stands...as...the fulfillment of all his foreboding.” In effect, “It was a day he himself might have authored, ‘DeLilloesque’” not only as the end-point of a conspiracy but as a mass-event witnessed by billions” (2–3). The notion that DeLillo’s earlier works had prefigured in fiction what actually happened in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001, formed the premise of many popular press commentaries (Franklin and O’Rourke 2007; Kakutani 2007; Litt 2007; Miller 2007; Rich 2007). *Slate*’s O’Rourke (2007) even “wondered, half-seriously, if Mohamed Atta and crew had been studying DeLillo.” However, she immediately corrects herself, contending:

Of course, it’s the other way around: It is DeLillo who has been studying us, and America’s place in the world, for more than 30 years now. He is our great late-twentieth-century chronicler of the hallucinatory realities that make up American history, and he has always viewed terrorism as one of the prime tools of nations and entities jockeying to have a role in global politics.

In other words, these reviewers credit DeLillo with uncanny foresight when the real-world social, economic, and political conditions he has narrativized for critique turn out to be the very conditions that fuel and typify the September 11 attacks. In these instances, DeLillo draws acclaim as a visionary writer whose fiction forecasts history. Yet, rather than expertise at reading tea leaves, his genuine, only slightly less-wondrous, talent lies in accurately and astutely assessing his contemporary global context’s character and implications.¹⁰ Effectively, through his writing, he has been able to sagely link on an unfailing trajectory the past, present, and future along a continuum of material causes and effects, whose intricate and implacable origins imbue the past-shaped future with the aura of inevitability.

Immediately after September 11, in keeping with the initial wave of non-fiction responses, journalists turned to other writers for insightful assessments of that day’s events and their impact (Versluys 2009, 12). *The New Yorker*, for example, published short reflections by figures such as John Updike, Jonathan Franzen, Aharon Appelfeld, and Susan Sontag, who recounted everything from their own stunned experiences as witnesses to their sharp outrage at the response within mainstream media

and politics (Updike et al. 2001). Many of these writers would eventually produce more sustained individual works engaging September 11 and its fallout. However, in contrast to these writers' particular interests in the September 11 historical landscape, DeLillo's extant preoccupations with terrorist conspiracies, televised spectacle, mass audiences, and global capital's tinderbox potential have apparently led readers not only to praise his prescience but also to expect his actual post-September 11 novel to be somehow retrospectively prophetic or oracularly insightful about what that day finally truly means for all of us. Such expectations, paradoxical and unreasonably ambitious, would of course be impossible for DeLillo to fulfill. Indeed, Junod (2007) concludes that *Falling Man* is "another beautiful artifact made exquisitely of ash," incommensurate with the circumstances it depicts.¹¹ Likewise, Michiko Kakutani (2007) characterizes the novel, "even within...parameters of reduced expectations," as "small and unsatisfying and inadequate." While Laura Miller (2007) speculates whether "DeLillo's prophetic moment had passed," O'Rourke (O'Rourke and Franklin 2007) thinks he simply does not have sufficient personal distance from the event to grasp and articulate its full context. In a sense, many critics have viewed September 11 as the realization of DeLillo's fiction and the fiction of *Falling Man* as a failure to realize September 11.¹² But what about these critics—do they themselves have sufficient personal distance to recognize whether a writer has produced a commensurate novel that largely, adequately, and satisfyingly grasps and articulates the full breadth, depth, and reach of September 11?¹³ Assessing a recent historical crisis on such a comprehensive scale under as-yet unfolding circumstances poses a tall order for novelist and analyst alike.¹⁴ But are such requirements of objectivity and omniscience ever possible or even necessary or desired for cultural exegesis? The practice of cultural literary studies presumes not (Shirane 2002, 513–514; Glass 2006, 20–21)¹⁵; accordingly, I return consideration of *Falling Man* to the narrower terms that had prompted these critics to view DeLillo's other novels as eerily perceptive: how does this work envision the links between past, present, and future in relation to a contemporary event comprised of material and contingent, though seemingly determinate, causes and effects?

The December 2001 issue of *Harper's Magazine* published an essay by DeLillo entitled, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September." In this piece, just three months after the World Trade Center has fallen, DeLillo observes, "There is something empty in the sky," and he outlines the writer's task as trying "to

give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space” (39). While the author offers reflections in immediate response to September 11, he also ends up previewing the themes that would become central to his 2007 novel, presumably part of his own effort to confront “all that howling space.” In a sense, the essay prologues in the form of non-fiction deliberation the concerns with time and consequence that order *Falling Man*’s fictional confrontation with an historical trauma’s aftermath. The essay’s ruminations about terrorism’s resistance to capitalism’s colonization of the future, with the present lost in the struggle, manifest in *Falling Man* through both the main characters’ post-September 11 dissociations and the story’s temporal structure, which intersperses a hijacker’s years-long preparation for September 11 within the larger, also temporally disjointed, narrative of the day’s fallout. Effectively, as the title itself suggests by figuring a never-ending plummet, DeLillo’s post-September 11 novel explores how this crisis can stall the present in a helpless interstice lodged between entrenched roots and their proliferating effects.¹⁶ For DeLillo, then, the howling space has been, is, and will be occupied by the specter of the individual’s ultimate vulnerability in total exposure to the forces grappling for preeminence over contemporary global consciousness.

THE FUTURE AS RUINS: *FALLING MAN*’S THEMATIC PREVIEW

DeLillo’s 2001 *Harper*’s essay begins with this somewhat grandiose notion of “global consciousness,” which he claims “the surge of capital markets” had shaped over the previous decade. Such a consciousness, colored by “the utopian glow of cyber-capital,” orients “us all to live permanently in the future” where “markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limit.” He immediately contrasts this limitless and uncontrolled capital-built future with the “danger and rage” generated through September 11: the “world narrative” terrorists have introduced to counter “the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life, and mind” so “It is *our* lives and minds that are occupied now” (33). For DeLillo, only the turn-of-the-century’s anti-globalization protesters seemed “to be a moderating influence, trying to slow things down, even things out, hold off the white-hot future” (34).¹⁷ Otherwise, within such a framework, individuals seem to have little choice, with discourse dominated either by the false siren lure of a rapid-paced, “high gloss...modernity” through

which "the chance of self-determination [is] diminishing for most people in most countries" (33) or by past-grasping terrorists' violently furious resentment (33–34). Either way, individuals are subject to "a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable" (33), whose deep, intricate origins orchestrate an increasingly certain future, entangling bystanders—"most people in most countries"—powerlessly in risks of the highest stakes. Moreover, even if such bystanders could meaningfully contribute to this rivalry for global temporality, with unchecked capitalism and terrorism the only two contestants, which side would anyone actually want to prevail? This forbidding dilemma, a genuine no-win scenario, signals a certain measure of helplessness in a present determined by profit-driven enterprise and its ideological outsiders, forces that are contouring the future as well.

For now, at least, DeLillo (2001) imputes to suicide terrorists an "edge" in this contest: "they are willing to die" (34). This impulse, described by bin Laden as desiring "death more than you desire life," slims what DeLillo terms "the wide world, routinely filled with exchange...an open circuit of work, talk, family, and expressible feeling" into the confines of a terse, directed "plot" (34). According to DeLillo, "Plots reduce the world," enabling their participants to "know who we are and what we mean in the world," but not to see that there is a "defenseless human being at the end of [their] gaze." Fixated on a mission, its justifications, its expected outcomes, and the comrades it organizes together, the suicide terrorist has no room for outlying concerns, extraneous information. As a result, DeLillo claims, "The sense of disarticulation we hear in the term 'Us and Them' has never been so striking, at either end." All that remains is an "apartness" (34), a separation within the same time and space between what terrorists are arranging for the future and what future victims and survivors cannot know awaits them. Such disconnection permits thinking about the future as already a ruin, a *fait accompli* toward which perpetrators advance and an ineluctable fate into which the unfortunate recede. Even the simple act of a terrorist's embrace of stark finitude implants an ominous anomaly within globalization's otherwise dominant momentum of consumption and expansion. Indeed, because the attacks eliminated the architecture that dominated and defined New York's skyline since the late 1960s, DeLillo claims, "We have fallen back in time and space" (38). Even when the future is anticipated, DeLillo asserts it is "not in our normally hopeful way but guided by dread" (39). These are tugs-of-war between past and future (40); once again, it seems, the present serves merely as

suspense between what has happened—what has been plotted—and what will happen: the plot coming to fruition.

DeLillo (2001) does recognize some measure of agency for those otherwise at the mercy of this tug-of-war between global capital and terror. He claims that while that “narrative ends in the rubble...it is left to us to create the counter-narrative.” In the day’s immediate wake, he points to the impromptu, local memorializations, consisting of homemade artifacts and communal gatherings; the missing person photographs; and the ruins and rubble itself as the diverse, generative, and bearable parts of this “counter-narrative,” what can be “set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response” (34).¹⁸ But he also points out “stories of heroism and encounters with dread. There are stories that carry around their edges the luminous ring of coincidence, fate, or premonition” (34). Such stories bear the tinge of temporal captivity: while “heroism” suggests a self-sacrificing choice, under conditions of dread, coincidence, fate, and premonition, people live, or do not, depending on what time has in store for them. These kinds of formulations evidence ambivalence about individuals’ ability to act with truly free choice. As DeLillo observes, “For a hundred who are arbitrarily dead, we need to find one person saved by a flash of forewarning” (34)—in effect, to balance the weighty reality of many helplessly and meaninglessly killed with the meager but more appealing promise that someone could be singled out for special favor, signaling that individuals still retain power and significance. This tension, between recognizing one’s self as a near-member of the helplessly and meaninglessly killed—a common feature of post-September 11 conceptualization—and preserving a sense of self as powerful and significant (an ideal reflective of more traditionally dominant US cultural views) as well as the earlier-noted concerns about a plot-shaped future, informs DeLillo’s September 11 counter-narrative *Falling Man*.

FATE AND TERROR IN *FALLING MAN*

Two thin parallel lines bifurcate the title words *Falling Man* on the hard-cover front of the US edition of DeLillo’s 2007 novel. On the back, an aerial perspective shows the top halves of the World Trade Center twin towers like the tips of an iceberg, emerging in lonely solitude above a thick carpeting of cloud cover. Unguarded in the empty expanse of a grainy blue sky, their exposure occasions a provocation: after all, vulnerability invites

the possibilities of both compassion and exploitation. In effect, the buildings seem to lie in wait for whatever will come to them, while the roots of their fate, like the towers' lower floors beneath the clouds, stretch in structural continuity to firm, determinative, but unseen foundations, bidding a time of their own. The double lines and paired buildings that pierce and separate words and space evince the fluid but manifest distinctions between one thing and another, here and there, before and after. The prospect of crossing into troubled territory from which there is no return pervades *Falling Man*, and these pictorial components of the book's production evoke the formidable boundaries that infuse with a sense of forced and inevitable conclusion the way the narrative's characters understand the relationship between past, present, and future in their own lives. As Lianne confronts her father's death from, and her own susceptibility to, Alzheimer's disease, Hammad embraces predestined jihad; and Keith loses himself in endless, timeless, anonymous rounds of poker, daily life seems bounded by structured but uncontrollable peril, where the end is destined by causes taking hold long before their effects are realized. Before these individuals might seize any opportunity for intervention or recognize whether any such opportunity even exists, and before the final instant actually arrives, circumstances have predetermined available outcomes. With *Falling Man* beginning and ending in the immediate aftermath of the towers' collapse, and the title summoning the enduring suspense of a continuous fall, past and future become a never-ending present, a condition of perpetual risk and foreclosed options—effectively the state of mortality, which is endemic to life and formative of all its prospects and limits. In other words, whether in the form of terminal disease, martyrdom, or surviving September 11, the specific end concerning each of these characters is the ultimate end: death. In this context, meaningful action forms under the circumscribed conditions of mortality acknowledged as one's doom (Liechty 86–87).

Falling Man begins on September 11, 2001, with lawyer Keith Neudecker in shock navigating his escape from Ground Zero just after the tower in which he worked has collapsed. The novel follows him and his estranged wife Lianne in later days and years, as they initially seem to reconcile under the stunning exigencies of extreme crisis, but fade apart as time moves forward and their day-to-day interactions remain flat and aloof. Throughout the novel, several episodes chronologically depicting the previous years of preparation for Hammad, a fictional composite of that day's suicide hijackers, interrupt the forward-and-back-moving narrative of their

efforts to recover from his operation's impact. The novel climaxes when Hammad completes his preparations and his plane collides with the tower in which Keith is working, prompting the story to elaborate on Keith's repressed memories of that morning. This structure invokes the random (in the sense that Hammad and the other hijackers, and Keith and the other victims, were utterly unconnected and unrelated until this moment) but fateful simultaneity that characterized the September 11 attacks themselves. That is, suicide hijackers readied themselves for a specific plan for mass murder but remained ignorant of any of the specific victims of this plan or the subsequent challenges survivors among them would face. At the same time, the victims of their actions remained entirely ignorant of these hijackers and the plan they would execute, requiring excavation of their identities in the days and weeks after the clandestine plot was accomplished, the first opportunity for most people to wonder and to learn, "who are these people?" Yet each character, each set of historical figures—hijackers and victims—through the coincidence of planning and fate, shared a single, passing alignment of time and place, an incidental, momentary conjunction, with grave and, for many, mortal implications. In fact, as the term "organic shrapnel" (DeLillo 2007, 16) suggests, at the instant of explosion, Hammad's body was shredded with enough force to embed in someone else's—in Keith's—body, occasioning a brutally physical manifestation of this exchange. Again, this random but fateful simultaneity, this feature of September 11 itself, echoes in the way the novel alternates between narratives of the hijacker's preparations and his operation's aftermath, only to link them in the brief second of ultimate encounter.

That primary narrative tells the story of Keith, who with his co-workers, his friends, comprised those "others," the human beings on the receiving end of the hijacked planes' impact. The moment of conjunction erupts and ends instantaneously, described in the novel first from the perspective within Hammad's approaching plane:

A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. (DeLillo 2007, 239)

This seamless transition in perspectives signals the coincidental, but otherwise meaningless, connection of the hijackers and their victims who,

unknown and unrelated to one another, share the time, place, and—for those who died—extreme outcome of fate. Of course, importantly, hijackers such as Hammad had foreknowledge that their victims were denied of what generally would happen that day; however, they lacked, as the narrative structure dramatizes, any awareness of the texture, the lived reality, of the individual lives that stretched before and after their attack.

LOSS OF SELF AND TIME THROUGH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Lianne is among those whose unknown individual lives *Falling Man* chronicles. For the daughter of a now-deceased Alzheimer's sufferer, doom has its own specific shape. When she was younger, her father Jack received an Alzheimer's diagnosis. He eventually decided he "did not want to submit to the long course of senile dementia" and instead shot himself with a rifle (DeLillo 2007, 40). Although "she tried to tell herself he'd done a brave thing [, it] was way too soon. There was time before the disease took solid hold but Jack was always respectful of nature's little fuckups and figured the deal was sealed" (41). In effect, the diagnosis forced him to confront the interconnections between contingency and destiny; although the nuances of the disease's trajectory might be open to chance and change, he knew the final result was certain and closed. Given this choice that was no choice, since he could not choose whether to die but only how, he opted for a swift and comparatively painless finish rather than the slow and dire struggle determined by illness. "Died by his own hand" are the words Lianne uses to think about this decision (218), words that come to her mind the second time she sees a performance artist re-enacting a businessman's jump from the World Trade Center towers (169). She has observed in her father and in the personated businessman a parallel dilemma: the choice that was no choice, a shared reaction to a sealed fate. Later in the novel, a few years after September 11, Lianne finds herself compulsively counting backward from one hundred in increments of seven, so even if her medical tests fail to indicate the onset of Alzheimer's, she can detect early symptoms of mental falter (187–188). She is living "in the spirit of what is ever impending" (212), an interstitial float in a present marked by the residue of her family's past that could presage her personal future. As an affliction with inherited risk factors, the seeds of Alzheimer's lurk in a past beyond her will and contour a future she cannot fully control. For Lianne, for her father, and for the falling man, terror looms not in the crevices of what could happen, carved as discernible turning points with

apprehended implications, but behind the solid door of what will be, the consummation of turning points that have already passed unrecognized and unavailable to cognizant contestation, subject instead only to negotiation within well-defined and immovable parameters.

In memory of her father and in consideration of her own susceptibilities, Lianne meets weekly with early-stage Alzheimer patients at an East Harlem community center. She guides this group as they write about their lives and share those writings with each other, an exercise in their self-preservation as they gradually yield to an illness that specifically compromises the memory and thoughtful reflection that typically constitute conscious personhood. However, when she asks the supervising therapist if she could increase the number of sessions, he advises against it, cautioning her, “From this point on, you understand, it’s all about loss. We’re dealing inevitably here with diminishing returns” (DeLillo 2007, 60). His warning forecasts the course of the disease as an irreversible decline; once set in motion, progress moves in only one debilitating direction. From the therapist’s point of view, Lianne’s attempts to forestall the inevitable, to collect the matter of these patients’ lives before illness’ dissipation, arrive already too late. Every moment forward in time cements a further remove from the selves she wants to preserve; no present effort she makes can recover what has been lost or alter the path of decay, she and they can act only to collect the matter of life in the midst of its passing. For them, “The truth was mapped in slow and certain decline. Each member of the group lived in this knowledge” (125). In this way, an Alzheimer’s prognosis serves as a pronouncement of fate, of the insurmountable, accumulating damage long ago planted in a body’s history that culminates in a single predictable and unavoidable conclusion. Her exertions, like her father’s suicide, can address only what happens in the meantime, in the space and time separating a determining factor from its ultimate result.

THE HIJACKER’S BIDDING TIME

DeLillo (2007) presents a different relationship between contingency and destiny through the character Hammad’s preparations to hijack an airplane on September 11. In the forensic scrutiny of that day’s events, investigators had found last instructions for the hijackers in the luggage of Mohamed Atta, which included exhortations to prayer and assurances that God’s will would determine the outcome of their actions (Lincoln 2003, 93–98). Apparently, predestination provided a rationale that the

hijackers could internalize over time to cohere as a group against dehumanized enemies whose own fate was also divinely preordained (Stern 2003, 261). This rationale could also have mitigated and contained any fear the hijackers themselves might feel during a murderous and suicidal undertaking; there might be comfort, after all, in feeling aligned with what God has prescribed. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo (2007) draws on excerpts of these instructions to suggest what might be going through the mind of a hijacker meeting his last moments (238–239). However, the principle of predestination also underlies the years of psychological training Hammad undergoes in anticipation of his mission.

Hammad first appears in *Falling Man* in Hamburg, Germany, prior to September 11 as someone who listens attentively to other young men from his mosque as they gather together to discuss religion and politics. Although he harbors some initial uncertainty about their views (DeLillo 2007, 79), he listens particularly to Amir—the vocal leader in Hamburg, later identified as Mohamed Atta—who preaches, “The time is coming, our truth, our shame, and each man becomes the other, and the other still another, and then there is no separation” (80). This desired dissolution of any separation between them poses an alternative solidarity to the separation they feel from the rest of the world, “the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies” (80). However, contrary to this group’s professed values, Hammad at this time continues a sexual relationship with a woman, prompting Amir to ask, “What is the difference between you and all the others, outside our space” (83)? Hammad accepts the criticism and commits more fully to a patent distinction, through values and through actions, between himself and his Hamburg confederates and everyone else: “there were rules now and he was determined to follow them. His life had structure. Things were clearly defined. He was becoming one of them now, learning to look like them and think like them. This was inseparable from jihad” (80). In effect, he has encountered a more conscious turning point than Alzheimer’s has made available to Lianne, but the path of this jihad features its own specific design. Once committing to this path, Hammad’s opportunities for free choice fade in favor of a conformity in purpose and practice that accomplishes this group’s singularity, signals their faithfulness to God’s plan, and readies them for their final destination.

By the time Hammad and his co-conspirators begin living in the United States, he has embraced finitude, his own and that of the world receding from him, which he feels in his body with the weight and certainty of a

bomb vest (DeLillo 2007, 172). At times Hammad senses that this outcome actually could be averted. One day he observes a car of laughing young people and imagines leaving his life and entering theirs, a volitional act that could have re-routed the progress of events in a different direction (172). Yet Amir manages to draw Hammad back to the furrows of a divine plan that renders human mortality a welcome duty rather than a dreaded horror. Amir insists, “The end of our life is predetermined. We are carried toward that day from the minute we are born.... This is not suicide in any meaning or interpretation of the word. It is only something long written. We are finding the way already chosen for us” (175). Once he falls completely into the slotted folds of fate, Hammad ceases questioning the reasons for and the limits of his mission. His remaining days become not about thinking but only about doing, only about fulfilling the preordained plot. In this way, “Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point” (174). Action accepted as destiny becomes its own justification; as DeLillo writes, “All he saw was shock and death. There is no purpose, this is the purpose” (177). Indeed, in his *Harper’s Magazine* essay, DeLillo (2001) comments, “Plots reduce the world” (34), which Marco Abel (2003) understands as a recurring theme for DeLillo (1249) and which Abel explains by asserting, “Plots reduce the world because plotting constitutes the virtual seed of destruction: Al-Qaeda’s plotting ended in the planes’ perfectly staged and executed double impact on the twin towers” (1243). At the same time, Irom (2012) characterizes plots as “a totalizing tendency that can become the justification for violence,” which the very structure of *Falling Man*—its “ethos of disconnection” and “nonlinear narrative” which perform the “counternarrative that DeLillo proposes”—thwarts (539). Plots permit the sense that the future is formed and contained by the visions that precede it. Even if alternative choices in fact remain, they go unrecognized because they have become irrelevant.

At the end of the novel, as impact between his plane and the building approaches, Hammad recalls a story an Iraqi veteran once told him of Iranian Shia boys sent in mostly unarmed multitudes to martyr themselves as distractions from equipped soldiers organizing to attack elsewhere (DeLillo 2007, 238). The sight and sound of their sacrifice had horrified the Iraqi storyteller, for whom the boys’ cries were “Not like something happening yesterday but something always happening, over a thousand years happening, always in the air” (78). But Hammad “took strength from this” (238), perhaps finding himself aligned with them on the “way

already chosen" that Amir had outlined (175). Elsewhere, according to Thurschwell (2007), DeLillo has portrayed "the future as pressing in on the present," but he has regarded "techno-scientific rationality[']... overwhelmingly successful powers of prediction and control...[as rendering] the future, from the point of view of human knowledge and human doubt, the equivalent of the past" (287). Here, however, the very opposite principle—non-techno-scientific, non-rational mortality—effaces the distinction between what has happened before and what will happen again. As Thurschwell writes, "in DeLillo's work, what is fundamentally at stake for...ideal types of historical consciousness is not their relationships to chronological time, but rather their relationships to death—to their own death and that of others. What distinguishes the terrorist... is an indifference to her own death and to the death of those she kills" (290). In effect, death *is*, and because of its ever-presence, it suggests a transhistorical link among those who choose to identify themselves with it and against those whose mortality they will leverage. Echoing DeLillo's words from the *Harper's* essay, Hammad reminds himself of this principle mode of separation, that "We are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength" (DeLillo 2007, 178). As impact between his plane and the building approaches, Hammad recalls piecemeal directives from the hijackers' last instructions that focus his attention on the performance of martyrdom in a vacuum of completion apart from the immediate horror of its intended effects.

A SURVIVOR'S GAMBLE: DODGING THE FUTURE WHILE TRYING TO PREVENT THE PAST

While death haunts Lianne's future with the specter of prolonged suffering and anoints Hammad's everyday routines with divine purpose, for Keith, it is a near-fact of his past that invades his present. His haunting by having only narrowly survived a day that killed his friends suggests that nothing is more fated than what has already happened. When Hammad had asked Amir about the people they would kill, Amir had responded, "The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others" (DeLillo 2007, 176). Keith and his co-workers, his friends, are those "others," the human beings on the receiving end of the hijacked planes' impact who share with the hijackers the time, place, and consequences of their fate, but not their foresight. In a modern era idealizing personal autonomy, sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991)¹⁹

characterizes fateful moments as “times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence” (113). However, Keith lacks the prescience of the hijackers and therefore any opportunity for conscious self-determination. Nevertheless, as Giddens argues, “They are moments when...a decision made, or a specific course of action followed, has an irreversible quality” (114). With or without awareness of implications, Keith’s presence at work on September 11 placed him on an irreversible track, a struggle with the aftermath of his friends’ gruesome deaths and his own chance survival.

Giddens (1991) also attributes to the conditions of modernity a preoccupation with circumstance. He asserts, “For where contingency is discovered, or manufactured, situations which seem closed and pre-defined can again look open...The capability to disturb the fixity of things, open up new pathways, and thereby colonise [sic] a segment of a novel future, is integral to modernity’s unsettling character” (133). Philosopher Nicholas Rescher (1995) conceives of luck as “destabilizing the balance between fate and merit,” superseding merit and suggesting fate because human beings choose and act with incomplete knowledge and power (4), leading to only partially controllable and at times wholly unforeseeable, yet entirely consequential, outcomes.²⁰ In other words, human ignorance and historical contingency thwart the possibility of accurately predicting the future, making room for the intervention of luck, or a force other than human agency and social determinacy, that can be used to account for why one thing happens and not another and to a particular person and not to someone else (42; see also Gelven 1991, 8–9). Rescher claims that “luck thrives on vulnerability” (39), noting that disasters, by separating victims from survivors on often seemingly arbitrary bases—such as “being in the wrong place at the wrong time”—especially foreground the kind of explanatory impasse at moments of greatest significance, life and death, that concepts of fortune and fate circumvent (21). In his brief history of probability theory, or “the calculus of chance” (116), Rescher discusses luck’s relationship to the practice of gambling (115–139). In this history, he points out philosophers’ optimistic view of probability theory as “a sign of the capacity of human reason to master the vagaries of uncontrollable circumstance” (138). However, he concludes:

while probability theory is a good guide in matters of gambling, with its predesignated formal structures, it is of limited usefulness as a guide amid the greater fluidities of life. The analogy of life with games of chance has its

limits, since we do not and cannot effectively play life by fixed rules, a fact that sharply restricts the extent to which we can render luck amenable to rational principles of measurement and calculation. (138–139)

In effect, he determines that crisis unsettles an individual’s sense of meaningfully directing his or her own life, leading to a suspicion that other, more numinous elements—such as luck—play a decisive role. But any attempt to regain meaningful direction by wresting luck into a more contained framework of discernible cause-and-effect, such as the kinds of probabilities that govern one’s chances in gambling, will prove futile given luck’s characteristic association with the unruly dynamics of lived experience. On the other hand, Gelven (1991) also dwells on gambling’s connection to personal control (33–48). He regards the gambler as possibly celebrating his or her “existence *as* [sic] autonomous from what he does and from those to whom he belongs and even from those by whom he is loved. He earns nothing, deserves nothing, owes nothing, is burdened by no obligation to repay or even to thank” (35). According to this formulation, fate and chance as courted by gambling provide a desired respite from the contained framework of discernible cause-and-effect. The gambler, then, in some ways welcomes the loss of responsibility following a worldview that affirms fate and accepts that “whatever happens must happen” (21). For Gelven, then, “The gambler who affirms the sheer lack of knowledge, determination, and control is delighting in the manifestation of this truth” (37). Although divergent, these views of gambling both posit the practice as a process through which a gambler can negotiate his or her sense of agency.

A few years after September 11, Keith is spending days and weeks at a time in casinos playing poker. Even during his pre-September 11 games with friends, the play was described as “testing the forces that govern events” (DeLillo 2007, 96), with players “wait[ing] for the prescient moment, the time to make the bet based on the card they knew was coming” (97). These men enjoyed calculated risk under voluntarily and self-structured conditions (96–99). However, an extended quote from *Falling Man* illustrates how the game enables Keith to compulsively re-enact his accidental survival of September 11, each hand reckoning anew Keith’s ability to influence the circumstances that affect him:

The cards fell randomly, no assignable cause, but he remained the agent of free choice. Luck, chance, no one knew what these things were. These

things were only assumed to affect events. He had a measure of calm, of calculated isolation, and there was a certain logic he might draw on...But the game had structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic when the player knows that the card he needs is the card that's sure to fall. Then, always, in the crucial instant ever repeated hand after hand, the choice of yes or no. Call or raise, call or fold, the little binary pulse located behind the eyes, the choice that reminds you who you are. It belonged to him, this yes or no.... (211–212)

At the poker table, Keith could tempt fate and assert choice over and over again, an intentional engagement with the incidental alignments that fell to him without warning at the World Trade Center. In this way, he could remain perpetually suspended between his own choices and any finality of consequence.

THE FALLING MAN

In the first pages of *Falling Man*, when Keith is just making his way from the South Tower's collapse, he hears the second tower's fall and thinks, "That was him coming down, the north tower" (DeLillo 2007, 5). Even later in the comfort of home, while watching television footage of the towers' destruction with Lianne, he "thought there he is, unbelievably, in one of those towers, and now his hand on hers...as though to console her for his dying" (134–135). His identification with the building and its demise, the feeling that he came down with the tower even as he continues to move away from it or watch it as recorded history, feeds a specter of fatalism against which he struggles in the wake of survival. This specter manifests bodily in the figure of the "Falling Man," a performance artist who jumps with a harness from high places in public areas throughout the city to recreate the pose and revisit the predicament of the man AP photographer Richard Drew photographed falling from the World Trade Center on September 11. As DeLillo traces Lianne's thoughts during the first time she witnesses this performance in person, he writes, "It held the gaze of the world...There was the awful openness of it...the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all" (33). For Lianne, this man's actions not only conjure the memory of what could have happened to her husband and might have happened to his friends (167), but somehow also forebode a "collective dread," or a doom permeating not just survivors' but also witnesses' understandings of

their own possible fates. In some ways, this plight materializes the Biblical fall's mythological recounting of humanity's exile into mortality at the moment of acquiring irreversible, condemning knowledge, or even the fall, as Shakespeare describes, "of Lucifer, never to hope again."²¹ The *Falling Man* recreates the horror on September 11 that caused Mayor Giuliani to say, "we're in uncharted waters now" (Junod 2003, 179), the conditions contributing to a shared recognition that matters of life and death were, and could be, beyond anyone's power.

About midway through the novel, Lianne discusses with her dying mother a painting that reminds Lianne of the twin towers and her mother of something "coming out of another time entirely, another century." Despite the apparent disagreement, her mother asks, "It's all about mortality, isn't it?" to which Lianne responds, "Being human." Her mother echoes immediately, "Being human, being mortal" (DeLillo 2007, 111). The painting to which they refer is a still life, a genre that conjures in its oxymoronic moniker the ever-present specter of death in life (Thurschwell 2007, 288). Thurschwell reads into much of DeLillo's writing the idea that a "living still life" could be "assigned the task of slowing down the future in the name of the present of lived experience" (291). This approach would contrast with capitalism's occupation of the future, as noted in DeLillo's *Harper's* essay, as well as the hijackers' proud proclamation in *Falling Man*: that they are distinguished from their victims because "We are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength, to love death" (DeLillo 2007, 178). Such a claim nuances the choices each character makes when confronting mortality; such a claim conjures questions of what it means as a human being to recognize death, in others but also in one's self. Thurschwell (2007) argues, "Death, just because we know that it will occur but do not know when, encroaches on every present moment of our experience—again, if we follow Heidegger this far, it structures the very nature of experience." Moreover, he references Derrida's ruminations that names, by acknowledging a person in his or her absence even while alive, presuppose death, signifying the paradoxical interdependency between the caring reach for someone whose impermanence necessitates that they be reached for. In other words, he concludes, "Without mortality there can be no love" (292). In *Falling Man*, the plight of the trapped victim in freefall looms as the never-ending human condition of terror and doom²² that mortality poses and which forms the premise of meaningful human life.

CONCLUSION: FELLOWSHIP WITH THE DEAD AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

I have reviewed here how two of Don DeLillo's post-September 11 writings evince and confront a sense of perpetual crisis in the wake of a day that showcased inescapable vulnerability. In his 2001 *Harper's* essay, DeLillo characterizes September 11 as instantly and comprehensively altering daily life, calling the attacks a "catastrophic event [that] changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years" (33). In effect, it was a "phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions" (38–39). DeLillo speculates that "For many people, the event has changed the grain of the most routine moment" (39). His recounting of that morning effectively outlines the cultural trauma phenomenon:

First the planes struck the towers. After a time it became possible for us to absorb this, barely. But when the towers fell. When the rolling smoke began moving downward, floor to floor. This was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened. We could not catch up to it. But it was real, punishingly so, an expression of the physics of structural limits and a void in one's soul, and there was the huge antenna falling out of the sky, straight down, blunt end first, like an arrow moving backward in time.

The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us.... The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. (39)

By tracing the intensifying dumbfounding among witnesses, even from afar, as destruction escalated, and describing it as a lagging behind—to the possible point of metaphorically (however inadequately, as DeLillo disclaims) "moving backward in time" with the falling antenna—DeLillo evokes the kind of worldview shattering that I argue constitutes cultural trauma. In effect, there is a present—"the primal terror" as well as the "shock and horror as it is"—as well as a past that such experiences overtake and a future of interpretive frameworks such as politics, history, and religion that will overwrite those same experiences and render them meaningful beyond the raw moment, in the new world which such previously unknown elements have produced. DeLillo (2007) opens *Falling Man*

just after the South Tower crumbles, writing, "It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night.... The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now" (3). He soon adds, "The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air" (4). Specifically for Keith, "These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after" (138). In this new after-world, DeLillo cautions in his 2001 essay, "We may find that the ruin of the towers is implicit in other things" (39), intrinsic to the taken-for-granted cultural landscape that the ruins themselves have created. In fact, he notes, "We are all breathing the fumes of Lower Manhattan, where traces of the dead are everywhere" (39), so that communion with the deceased becomes a living legacy.

At the conclusion of his essay, DeLillo (2001) recalls having seen a Muslim woman in prayer facing a store front (but ultimately Mecca) on a Lower Manhattan street a month before September 11. She is expressing personal religious devotion in a space that radical Islamic forces will soon target as the wellspring of godless exploitation by indifferent economic interest. This incidence occasions in his reflection appreciation for "the daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York," a city that "will accommodate every language, ritual, belief, and opinion." From this point-of-view, this woman, at this time, simply by pursuing her own intimate, individual beliefs and practices, becomes part of the nameless, faceless expanse of human diversity that constitutes the city's identity and, according to DeLillo, its superiority. But the author adds, "In the rolls of the dead of September 11, all these vital differences were surrendered to the impact and the flash...the dead are their own nation and race...a union of souls." He concludes by characterizing the hadj as a ritual through which participants remember "in prayer their fellowship with the dead." Of course, after September 11, this prayerful action by a Muslim would likely lose its innocent anonymity and accrue enhanced susceptibility to fear and prejudice, as would the essay's final words: "*Allahu akbar*. God is great" (40), also the final words of the United Flight 93 hijackers (Hirschhorn).²³ When annihilating violence—whether economic, political, or religious—overwrites any impulse to live and let live, perhaps death alone, as a universally shared and inescapable fate, can offer the common ground necessary to impel earnest community.²⁴ Indeed, as DeLillo (2001) writes, "People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel"

(39). At the very least, this conceptualization offers a more optimistically inclusive version of communion-through-mortality than the bleaker, fear-oriented recognition of mutual vulnerability summoned by the popular press oral history collections. Certainly, this example of the development of literary representations by the mid-2000s indicates how those forms can help to foster an interactive and more expansive meditative space. But as *Falling Man* illustrates, with its main characters retreating from their human connections before and after September 11, sometimes separation from others in denial of this commonality offers a tempting, phantom alternative: that we can forestall such an outcome, and arrest the present in never-ending suspense between conditions and their consequences.

NOTES

1. Batchelor (2011) specifies DeLillo's use of "literary techniques" to secure this effect (179); Conte (2011) points directly to Richard Drew's photograph and its invocation in *Falling Man* as mediating victims' trauma with intimate relevance for readers (581).
2. Congruent with my discussion next of DeLillo's apparent "pre-science" about September 11, Cruz (2011) argues, "Understanding *Falling Man* correctly in light of DeLillo's earlier works can help readers see how the book calls them to act in the age of a perpetual 'War on Terror'" (143).
3. Araújo (2015), who focuses on visibility following the extensive media coverage of September 11, writes, "To be sure, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 provided shocking images which the western psyche is still trying to come to terms with" (1). As the oral history accounts suggest, the western psyche has also been grappling in important ways with the existential, mortal vulnerabilities to which those images pointed.
4. Survivors asked that the Naudet brothers' documentary *9/11*, which depended on footage recorded at the World Trade Center site during the attacks, be edited to exclude "screams and the sounds of bodies hitting the pavement" (Horsburgh 2002).
5. On September 11, 2013, an outcry arose when *Esquire* blundered by inadvertently posting the picture online next to this advertising text: "Making Your Morning Commute More Stylish: Look Good on Your Way to Work" (*Huffington Post* 2013). This essentially

knee-jerk reaction twelve years after the photograph was first taken confirms its iconicity and continuing emotional charge.

6. As this discussion suggests, substantive consideration of the context and aftereffects of September 11 had also begun within US televisual fiction by the mid-2000s, which the next chapter will address more fully.
7. Duvall (2011) contends that “Richard Drew’s photograph...seems to be...bespeaking the end of the American dream of unassailable global supremacy in the post-Cold War era” (165), which echoes both DeLillo’s and *Mad Men*’s ongoing themes. In the final season’s episode “Lost Horizon,” the show’s central character Don Draper spies through the window of a conference room a passenger jet passing the Empire State Building in a clear blue sky (May 3, 2015). At this moment, he abruptly leaves the office to travel across the United States in search of some way to make peace with himself. *Mad Men*’s relationship to September 11 seems greater than its use of falling man imagery alone, and its resonant critiques of underlying and long-standing American contradictions has not gone unnoticed, at least within mainstream media—including Tom Junod (2012; also, see Hill 2012 and Zuckerman 2013), who has also written about Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007). Indeed, without making the connection explicitly, Junod’s work facilitates linking *Mad Men* to Don DeLillo (also, see Caesar 2010, Kavanagh 2012, and Tranter 2010), with Don Draper and company performing what DeLillo’s writing has long engaged: personal dislocations within the context of global capital’s destabilizing growth.
8. Discussions of DeLillo’s “prescience” resurface across post-September 11 critical scholarship (Bizzini 2010, 44; Cruz 2011, 138, 140–142; Duvall 2011, 154; Kauffman 2009, 652; Laist 2010, 153–154; Olster 2011b, 117). Marc Schuster (2008) characterizes *Falling Man* as “where the worst nightmares of DeLillo’s previous works have come to fruition” (193).
9. Miller (2007) also uses this term.
10. While alluding to literary theorists’ similar attributions of DeLillo’s “prophetic foreknowledge,” law and literature scholar Adam Thurschwell (2007) traces these prophecies’ “roots in the deep structures of Western culture—economic, technological, and symbolic” (280).

11. To be fair, in his review Junod deems a number of post-September 11 novels to have fallen short in representing the compelling emotional realities that he feels documentary-style journalism powerfully and effectively communicated. On the other hand, DeLillo ventures—as did Junod—to dwell on what *New York Times* critic Frank Rich (2007) terms “the third rail of 9/11 taboos:” the people who jumped out of the towers to their deaths to escape the horrific conditions inside. Literature scholar Frost (2008) asserts, “The real dreadfulness of the ‘jumpers’ is not captured by the still frame. It is what comes before and after: the drama of the compelled choice or suicide. The falling bodies have been seen, but they have not been understood; and their representation, by news sources and artistic forms alike, suggests a general desire that they remain beyond the reaches of understanding” (189). Considering Rich’s evocative terminology, which accurately reflects cultural discomfort and ambivalence about these figures, DeLillo might be considered more ambitious than these other writers, setting himself a more delicately complex task and therefore a greater chance of alienating readers or at least failing to satisfy their expectations.
12. *Slate* critic Ruth Franklin (Franklin and O’Rourke 2007) explains that the challenge with writing and reading a “9/11 novel” lies in the predicament that “we all agree it exists but have no idea what shape it ought to take or what its purpose should be.” For literature scholar Benjamin Bird (2007), the task is clear that “the role of contemporary fiction writers [is] to enquire into the character of the loss America has experienced and the ways in which it might be addressed” (562), an aim that Morley (2008) echoes (296). However, Marco Abel (2003) credits DeLillo’s *Harper’s Magazine* essay with “demonstrat[ing] the impossibility of saying anything definitive about 9/11—especially anything that captures the event’s meaning” (1237). Keniston and Quinn (2008) outline the delicate terrain for negotiating representations and interpretations of the event’s historical materiality: “there remains a desire to be true—to the calamity itself, to the feelings of the victims’ families, to the collective need to mourn. But...no one wants 9/11 to be misrepresented, politicized, co-opted, or distorted. Yet, it seems difficult not to do just this” (1). Additionally, such responses must also navigate the tensions between private experience and public reaction and senses of rupture as well as

continuity (3). On the other hand, Smith’s (2011) criticism is that *Falling Man* features a depoliticized form of affect, and for Gray (2009) and Rothberg (2009), depoliticization derives from the novel’s domestic setting and focus. Then, of course, both DeRosa (2011) and Duvall and Marzec (2015) point out that much criticism of post-September 11 literature depends upon the application of pre-given standards and expectations about what representation should/should not do, rather than attentive analysis to what it *is* doing.

13. As Rich (2007) notes, “Today 9/11 carries so many burdens—of interpretation, of sentimentality, of politics, of war—that sometimes it’s hard to find the rubble of the actual event beneath the layers of edifice we’ve built on top of it.”
14. Versluys (2009) characterizes September 11 as “unpossessable” in the “instantaneity of its horror and in its far-flung repercussions”: (1) in effect, a semiotic crisis (2) which ultimately, nevertheless and necessarily, does become subject to interpretive schemes (3) which can anchor in narrative—whether exploitive or constructive—the traumatic event for survivors and global witnesses (3–4).
15. Shirane (2002) speaks generally about how literary studies, as a form of cultural studies, valuably contributes to post-September 11 understanding by both catalyzing analysis of, and educating people about, cultural processes—affinities as well as frictions in multi- and cross-cultural settings. At the same time, author Julia Glass (2006) acknowledges the oft-repeated fear about fictional representations of September 11 coming “too soon,” as if later in the future “the dust of 9/11 will settle” and all will become clear. This caution again evidences a sense that proximity to an occurrence precludes constructive and relevant critical responses to it. While Glass herself admits to feeling a “sense of futility, even shame,” as if writing “fiction...seemed all at once trivial, quaint, indulgent; worse, it seemed irrelevant,” she counters this fear with the idea that writers can usefully help to recalibrate shared cultural expectations by responding in the very moments of significant change (21). Versluys (2009) offers similar concerns as well as hopes for fiction after September 11 (1–17).
16. Polatinsky and Scherzinger’s (2013) discussion of the notion of the “entredeux,” the “in-between,” also considers how *Falling Man* meditates on forms of suspension in time (130).

17. Paralleling DeLillo's appreciation for anti-globalization's efforts to lengthen the present and moderate any heedless, headlong future plunge, Abel (2003) argues that this essay itself, by "foregrounding the event's how" to defer response while contemplating conditions and causes, attempts to "slow down the rapid speed of judgment" about September 11 (1237). Versluys (2009) contends that novels similarly occasion ethical responses to September 11 by engaging non-partisan, contextually situated viewpoints that avoid swift, thoughtless oversimplifications (17).
18. L. Kauffman (2008) characterizes DeLillo's conceptualization of the counter-narrative as "the realm of the unspeakable, the unfathomable" (354)—in a sense, the gestures that acknowledge non-meaning or at least forestall fixed meaning.
19. Olster has noted shared concerns between DeLillo and Giddens regarding the conditions of global capitalism (2011a, 8).
20. Philosopher Michael Gelven (1991) considers "fate...chance, destiny, and fortune" to be "kindred notions" (105). In this discussion, I use them as distinct, though related, terms: while fate and destiny indicate fixed trajectories toward unavoidable outcomes independent of human agency, chance and fortune, or luck, indicate more arbitrary forces equally independent of human agency that channel human action.
21. *Falling Man* does make a vague reference to Lucifer, the fallen angel in Biblical mythology. When Lianne reads newspaper accounts of the performance artist's life and eventual death by natural causes, she recalls Drew's photograph as having "burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific" (DeLillo 2007, 222).
22. Versluys (2009) recognizes how *Falling Man* portrays a never-resolved, ongoing September 11 crisis (20). However, while this approach permits DeLillo to centralize the event's non-redemptive core, which official discourse sought to overlook (23), it poses a kind of melancholia, which in psychoanalytic frameworks contrast with mourning to produce pervasive unsettlement susceptible to extreme and reactionary responses (48).
23. Within the novel, Lianne finds a neighbor's loud—ambiguously "Arab" or "Muslim"—music offensive and provocative (DeLillo 2007, 67–70).

24. Thurschwell (2007) envisions a “loving acceptance of the mortality inscribed not only in our physical selves but in our language as well,” positing that DeLillo’s essay provides “an affirmation of mourning and imaginative identification with one’s other, and the potential for community that they offer” (297). In *Falling Man*, Nina’s lover Martin tells Lianne, “I am always your mother’s lover. Long before I knew her. Always that. It was waiting to happen” (DeLillo 2007, 193), a profession of destined, never-ending love that counterbalances the more sinister fatefulness coloring the other characters’ life trajectories.

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The Crisis Fetish in Post-September 11 American Television

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE FOR TELEVISED CRISIS AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

Scenario One: A commercial airliner en route from Sydney to Los Angeles inexplicably breaks apart somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, marooning the surviving passengers on a remote and mysterious island. Under the shadow of their plane's wreckage on an unknown beach, these strangers from around the world must now confront fundamental tensions between individual and community, with survival itself at stake ("Pilot: Part 1" September 22, 2004; "Pilot: Part 2" September 29, 2004). This plight—in effect, what protagonist Jack Shephard (Matthew Fox) characterizes as the choice to "live together or die alone" (Nigro 2009, 31)—forms the premise for ABC Studios' 2004–2010 television series *Lost*.

Scenario Two: Once enslaved cyborgs known as the Cylons engineer a successful coup over their creators and enemies, the human beings who live on twelve neighboring planets. After the Cylons' surprise nuclear attack renders these planets unlivable, the last remnants of the human species totter across space searching for a mythical refuge ("Episode #1.1" December 8, 2003; "Episode #1.2" December 9, 2003). This

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predicament, conjured by the tagline, “The world is over. The fight has just begun” (*Battlestar Galactica* 2004), drives the plot for British Sky Broadcasting’s 2005–2009 science fiction serial *Battlestar Galactica* (often shortened to *BSG*).

Scenario Three: On an otherwise ordinary day, everyone on Earth passes out for 137 seconds. While unconscious, each person glimpses an excerpt of his or her life in the future, specifically beginning at 10 p.m. on April 29, 2010 (although some do not glimpse anything at all, suggesting they will not live to see that day). When they regain consciousness, they return to a world marred by incredible destruction since the simultaneous global blackout disrupted all human-operated systems, most noticeably air and ground transportation. Civilians and law enforcement investigators alike fixate not only on the past cataclysm that has changed everything but also on the certain future date that has become both a memory and an anticipation of grave consequence, as well as the possibility that such a cataclysm could happen again (“No More Good Days” September 4, 2009). “No More Good Days,” the title of the premiere for HBO Entertainment’s short-lived 2009–2010 fantasy *FlashForward*, draws on a little girl’s (Lennon Wynn) ominous description of her future vision to endow with doom the deferral between D-Day’s inception and its fulfillment. Like the characters in *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, *FlashForward*’s survivors find themselves materially and existentially adrift in the thrall of extreme circumstances.

Each of these shows features prominently, as premises and/or ongoing plot devices, world-changing threats and calls—unevenly satisfied—for heroic response. The first chapter of this project noted how radical vulnerability figured prominently in actual witnesses’ and survivors’ oral history accounts among the earliest narrativizations of September 11, and the previous chapter followed a similar preoccupation within Don DeLillo’s literary fiction from the mid-2000s, manifesting through the specific horror of the falling man and mortality as inescapable fate. Additionally, these narratives have all functioned as sites through which readers can negotiate their own susceptibilities, complicities, and investments in the narrated quandaries and exigencies. Across different kinds of texts for different kinds of readers, narratives in the years following September 11 have dwelled on uncertainty, insecurity, and loss rather than on more traditionally dominant celebrations of redemption or heroism. In this chapter, I now turn to the fascination with life- and world-altering calamity on prime-time US television in the first decade of the twenty-first century.¹

TRAUMA, CULTURE, AND FETISHIZED CRISIS

Commonly, traumatization subjects a survivor to the “tyranny of the past,” or a “fixation on trauma” (van der Kolk and McFarlane 1996, 4) characterized by compulsive preoccupation with an experience that has not been accepted and integrated into a person’s understanding of self and life trajectory (5–11). Interestingly, although the term “fetish” has also been associated with psychology, with its roots in Freudian theories about psychosexual neuroses, an anthropological approach more closely reflects how this post-traumatic compulsion might manifest under communal conditions. William Pietz (1985) outlines how the fetish, across its interdisciplinary applications, relates specifically to the “problematic of the social value of material objects” (7). First, he notes the “irreducible materiality” of the fetish object, which signals that object as the end concern of attention, rather than as a reference to something beyond itself (7). Second, he describes the fetish object’s role as the integration site of heterogeneous impulses, beliefs, and practices; as a singular node for these disparate elements’ amalgamation, the fetish object also occasions perpetual revisitations to the original integrating moment (7–8). Third, he contends that the fetish object emblemizes the social construction of value, since cross-cultural estimations starkly differ about a given object’s worth and purpose (9). Fourth, Pietz points to the fetish as a locus external to the body that nevertheless has power over the body (10). In effect, a fetish emerges when “a crisis brings together and fixes into a singularly resonant unified intensity an unrepeatable event (permanent in memory), a particular object or arrangement of objects, and a localized space” (12). In this way, Pietz asserts that for the embodied subject, the fetish pins down in time and space and indicates as compelling complex processes of identification and resistance (14). Drawing on Pietz, I assert that a shared trauma can precipitate such a commanding fixation, with its showcasing of helplessness in the face of harm crystallizing in witnesses’ consciousness as an ongoing struggle with the parameters of potential victimization and chance survival. I argue that television shows centralizing crisis in their serialized iterations operate as fetish objects for the originating crisis of September 11, 2001.

Before saying more about September 11, I want to revisit the notion that narratives, televised or otherwise, have long featured prominently in post-traumatic responses. For traumatized individuals, treatment typically focuses on transforming obsessive memories into more constructive forms

of meaning, forms that place the event into a discrete moment within personal history and into a productive role for future personal development (van der Kolk and McFarlane 1996, 19). In this sense, then, narrative plays an integral role in recovery from trauma; stories have produced the culturally intelligible selves and worlds (Carr 1986) that traumatic events disrupt and reveal as contingent and vulnerable (Herman 1992; Janoff-Bulman 1992). Likewise, stories provide a communally accessible site for making sense of post-trauma knowledge and experience by serving as “technologies of memory,” or interactive mechanisms enabling individuals to participate in the public narrativization of traumatic events (Sturken 1997, 9). Through this narrativization, meanings emerge that can reinforce, question, or unevenly engage the threatened dominant narrative, complexly knitting together—although, at times, also dividing—individuals and communities.

Specifically, though, Wilson (1993) has argued that televised narratives occasion a hermeneutic circle of meaning formation, through which viewers move back and forth between the parts, or the individual episodes, and the series as a whole, and from their personal lifeworld horizons to the show’s horizon of meaning, to actively construct and revise their own interpretations in negotiation with the series’ dominant or preferred readings (51). For this reason, although a show must involve a sufficiently conventional set of plots, themes, and so on to be intelligible to a broad audience, the dynamic composition of such a broad audience ensures that meaning will never fully be contained or restricted to a specific, stable reception (21). He adds that production techniques that generate in viewers’ senses of alienation, distance, and/or defamiliarization from what they might otherwise consider to be recognizable and commonplace promote critique of the televised exigencies’ real-world corollaries (182–191). Moreover, a series that features contentious, unresolved moral dilemmas creates space for viewers to formulate their own particular judgments and responses (97). As will be discussed further shortly, and much like the literary fiction explored in the previous chapter, each of the fictional series explored here afford viewers these very possibilities when considering the post-September 11 policies comprising the War on Terror. However, the horror of the precipitating event, September 11, 2001, seems to persist unabated, fetishized through tenacious revisitations of that morning’s most pernicious features. In effect, the initial crisis’ component conditions—vulnerability, exposed mortality, and heroism-at-a-price—seem to dominate television shows from the mid-2000s, such as *Lost*, *Battlestar*

Galactica, and *FlashForward*, suggesting that these narratives might be enacting or fetishizing disaster in ways that complicate their contribution toward therapeutic recuperation² and instead persistently instantiate the culturally traumatic contours of September 11.

CHOICE, FATE, AND SEPTEMBER 11

On the morning of September 11, 2001, news coverage initiated immediately after a passenger plane first hit the World Trade Center's North Tower afforded national, and even international, viewers a live view of the moment when a second airliner crashed into the South Tower and a day of relentless horrors accelerated. By the end of the day, all seven buildings comprising the World Trade Center complex, including most prominently the 110-story Twin Towers, had collapsed; a section of the Pentagon targeted by another hijacked commercial jet had crumbled; and yet another airplane had smashed into the ground in rural Pennsylvania ("September 11: Chronology of Terror" 2001). Nearly 3000 people died that day (National Commission 2004, 311), many of them visibly as they jumped from where they were trapped at the World Trade Center's highest floors (Junod 2003). Hundreds of first responders from the New York City Fire and Police Departments, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and other agencies who were laboring to evacuate civilians from the towers were killed when the buildings suddenly fell (National Commission 2004, 311). Since then, even more of these celebrated "heroes" have died of health complications stemming from the noxious environmental conditions pervading the rescue and recovery effort ("9/11 Health: Rescue and Recovery Workers").

This rapid, devastating, and irreversible unraveling of what began as an ordinary, in fact beautiful, Tuesday morning poses daunting problems of meaning not only for survivors but also for those who witnessed events from the distance of the news media. After all, this uncontained progression of unexpected destruction raises questions about how to live with the possibility of a final harm that we cannot foresee or control. While such a possibility always persists in daily life—after all, who can foresee or control the more commonplace misfortune of a fatal car accident?—the September 11 attacks showcased our ever-present mortality through the broadcast of thousands dying to an unprecedented number of witnesses who were in no position to help, fostering a common sense of ultimate vulnerability. At the same time, as that day became the past and the War on

Terror became a daily and ongoing response to the hijackings, September 11 would seem to have incited a cultural struggle not only to make sense of the original crisis but also to determine when that crisis ends, if at all.

Here, I return to sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990) to consider the parameters of fate and choice, who has argued that modernity generally, as a historical period distinguished by rapid, comprehensive change (6), features a daily “sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part outside of our control” (2–3), a sense that countermands modernity’s investment in rational control over life trajectories that have not been predetermined (1991, 75–80). This contradictory impulse is emblematic of an era imbued with uneasy balances between “*security versus danger* and *trust versus risk*” (1990, 7; sic). In this formulation, Giddens defines risk as the possible unwanted outcome of our own choices (30–31). He points specifically to the persistent hazard of “low probability high consequence risks” (133), which at the time of his writing at the end of the Cold War essentially meant nuclear war between nations, a peril now also attached to non-state actors and coded within the calamitous catchall terms “Weapons of Mass Destruction” (WMD). From this persistent hazard emerge notions of fate (133), or pervasive feelings of “*angst* or *dread*” about an inescapably unsafe future (100; sic). Ultimately, Giddens (1991) contends, crisis or periodic upheaval is familiar to modernity, as is the existential anguish that results from the relentless shadow of a likely remote but nevertheless catastrophic unforeseeable and unavoidable future (184–185). In this sense, “death is unintelligible exactly because it is the point zero at which control lapses” and therefore poses the kind of “fateful moment” that renders modern subjects who ordinarily understand themselves as autonomous agents most susceptible to finding recourse in fate as an explanation or interpretation for the inevitable event (203).

Of course, the concept of fate is not new to modernity. The question “Why me?” often appears as an appeal to purpose or reason when circumstances of great impact occur over which we have neither adequate control nor satisfactory knowledge of origins, causes, or meaning (Gelven 1991, 5–8; Solomon 2003, 436). When fate or destiny is proposed as an answer to this question, such an answer acknowledges human finitude, both in the short-term sense of a lack of omniscience and omnipotence and in the long-term sense of ultimate mortality (Gelven 1991, 27, 184–193). Theological frameworks within more traditional cultural structures could offer divine intention or even divinely sanctioned human free will as a more

organized alternative to the apparent whims of fate (18–19). However, the modern age that Giddens assesses has developed a view of human action and agency independent of any transcendent providential force. What remains discomfiting when at the mercy of the unknowable and uncontrollable, then, is not only the undesired experience of misfortune and suffering but the uncertainty about why—not just why *me* but also *why* me; what significance, if any, does my misfortune and suffering provide (Solomon 2003, 438–441)? In the 1990s, destiny-oriented apocalyptic and millennial movements intervened in a post-Cold War period of swift social transition to offer coherent, ordered, and compelling worldviews (Stewart and Harding 1999, 289–290). In the wake of the September 11 hijackings, the media dwelled both on fate’s caprice through stories of happenstance escape and survival (Frank 2004, 646–647; see also DiMarco 2007; Fink and Mathias 2002; Murphy 2002) and on heroic rescue’s price through stories of endless funerals and memorial services for the deceased and presumed deceased firefighters and police officers, along with ongoing reporting of the Ground Zero recovery effort. In effect, after September 11, preoccupations with fate resurfaced, but often in tandem with questions of choice, in a seeming negotiation of the limits of human power given the potential for utter helplessness. I turn now to how these concerns manifest through a sample of television series beginning in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

LOST: “LIVE TOGETHER, DIE ALONE”

Lost premiered on ABC in the United States on September 22, 2004 (“*Lost*”). The two-part pilot begins with an extreme close-up shot of the opening eye of a man³ in a business suit, who recovers consciousness while lying on the ground in a wooded area. After he gathers himself enough to get up and stumble onto a beach clearing, he (and viewers) starts to hear chaotic sounds, which intensify as the camera pans to pursue his perspective and reveal a commercial airliner’s wreckage. After overcoming the momentary shock of what he is seeing, the unidentified man rushes into the melee of panicked survivors, debris, and the bodies of the injured and the dead to help. He performs, essentially, heroically: as the burning and unstable airplane remnants continue to pose a danger, he responds to those most urgently needing aid, from a man trapped under a piece of the plane to an alarmed pregnant woman (Emilie de Ravin), even taking over a seemingly lifeless woman’s resuscitation when a man identifying himself

as a trained lifeguard (Ian Somerhalder) fails to administer proper mouth-to-mouth technique (“Pilot: Part 1”).

Viewers soon learn that he is Jack Shephard, an expert spinal surgeon. His characterization, as well as other survivors’ character development, becomes a centerpiece of the show’s exploration of how an island with mysterious properties and inhabitants affects and transforms a collection of stranded individuals with troubled pasts and uncertain futures. Yet this initial scene in disaster’s immediate aftermath has already showcased these transformations’ fundamental components, and almost all we need to know to frame what will happen on this island has already been told. In a September a mere three years after a real-world plane-centered catastrophe (Nilges 2009, 150), *Lost* dramatizes the complexities of individuals’ and communities’ post-crisis responses given the highest stakes imaginable: navigating the tenuous divide between life and death (Nigro 2009, 31). In the pilot episodes, viewers see exigent circumstances; calls for help; individuals too confused, scared, self-interested, or inexperienced to act effectively; individuals willing and able to act readily, effectively, and selflessly; characters who do not speak English amidst otherwise entirely English-speaking travelers; characters with incommensurable backgrounds such as a con artist from the American South (Josh Holloway) or a former interrogator for the Iraqi National Guard (Naveen Andrews) who harbor deep suspicions toward one another; and the arbitrary, unexplained, and inexplicable distinctions between the living and the dead (“Pilot: Part 1” September 22, 2004; “Pilot: Part 2” September 29, 2004). Yet once these particular emergencies subside, these disparate passengers connected only by the coincidence of having boarded the same doomed international flight still must face a basic, commanding question that will loom over the rest of the series: what do we do now? Essentially, viewers encounter versions of vulnerability, exposed mortality, and complicated heroism that echo contemporary difficulties for real-world witnesses and survivors. This scenario, while not mirroring September 11, 2001, in any direct way, summons that day’s horrific dilemmas as well as its most enduring, pressing, and unsolved concerns about risks that derive from and affect global community collisions and formations (Nigro 2009, 31–32; Nilges 2009, 151; Blauvelt 2009).

Later in *Lost*’s first season, as the remaining passengers begin to realize that the island itself is dangerous and that rescue is not coming soon, Jack provides an answer to that commanding question of “what next?” In a stirring speech about survival, he says:

It's been six days, and we're all still waiting. Waiting for someone to come. But what if they don't? We have to stop waiting. We need to start figuring things out... Every man for himself is not going to work... We need to figure out how we're going to survive here... Last week most of us were strangers. But we're all here now. And God knows how long we're going to be here. But if we can't live together—we're gonna die alone. ("White Rabbit" October 20, 2004)

This vision, of strangers brought together only by chance uniting to save one another in their mutually desperate circumstances, offers an inspiring approach to the environmental hazards they all face. Indeed, throughout the series, this island-formed community develops, fractures, and perseveres as its individual members wrestle with their commitment to the "live together, die alone" credo. However, this credo, while underscoring the extremity of their situation, addresses only *how* survival might be possible for most of these people. Ultimately, whether individual members actually do live or die always ends up raising the more profound question of *why*, of what Solomon (2003), as noted earlier, termed "significance" (438–441)—whether an individual's endurance or demise matters materially and metaphysically. As Solomon has also argued, fatalism often relieves this burden of wondering why, since it stipulates with certainty that it simply *had* to happen for that person's life to make sense (450). As the show's central thematic thread repeatedly foregrounds, significance typically wavers on the pivot of agency, between characters such as John Locke (Terry O'Quinn) who view the way forward as destiny beckoning and those such as Jack who tends to see only hard choices with no guarantees. In effect, *Lost* continually interrogates without finally determining the extent to which human beings can freely choose the direction, outcome, and meaning of their own actions (see also Girard and Meulemans 2008, 89–101; Werther 2008, 221–230; Addey 2008, 231–240). In this way, the series focalizes ambivalence about fate in its dramatization of crisis-provoked practical and existential quandaries.

Tensions between fate and choice permeate all of the characters' preoccupations with how their past failures have shaped or even prefigured their future prospects. Indeed, the final season reveals that numinous island guardian Jacob (Mark Pellegrino) has indirectly and anonymously influenced the main characters' lives since their childhoods to draw them to his island ("Lighthouse" February 23, 2010). Such intervention, however oblique, indicates that the very fact that these people came together at all depends upon a complex interplay of their conscious intentions with

the necessities imposed by forces beyond themselves. Specifically, though, I concentrate on Jack and Locke, whose rivalry is rooted in an explicit dispute about destiny that undergirds the entire narrative arc. Jack initially takes the island's perils at face value, as unwanted challenges to be overcome or at least endured until rescue for everyone can be secured. For Locke, however, who after years of paralysis instantly and mysteriously regains use of his legs on the island, the crash survivors clearly have some transcendent purpose for being there...he just never fully comes to understand what that purpose might be. The pair's polar positions,⁴ summed up by the second season premiere's title, "Man of Science, Man of Faith" (September 21, 2005), constantly lead to arguments⁵ about how to handle the island's hazards—incidentally also placing questions of sound leadership front and central to all characters' debates about survival. Their separate stances create a crucial turning point at the beginning of Season Four, when Jack convinces some of the survivors to make their way to a freighter that could rescue them, and Locke convinces other survivors that they should stay on the island ("The Beginning of the End" January 31, 2008). This divergence directs the remainder of the show's plot, placing characters on paths that only the series finale entirely clarifies. By that time, John Locke has long been confirmed dead, his last thoughts in befuddlement as he is murdered without having fulfilled what he thought was his destiny: to save the island ("LA X" February 2, 2010). But interestingly, in the final episode, Jack dies having willfully sacrificed himself for that very same goal, a goal he once derided as reckless fantasy: fulfilling a destiny of saving the island ("The End" May 23, 2010). Such a denouement threads a careful course between choice and fate, suggesting that rather than being opposed, one commitment to some extent invokes the other. In this way, by instantiating as unsettled the boundaries of vulnerability and heroism under mortal conditions, the six-season serial proffers a fetish for a post-September 11 era in which such concerns remain both vital and in doubt.

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA: "THE WORLD IS OVER.
THE FIGHT HAS JUST BEGUN"

Battlestar Galactica debuted in the United States as a miniseries on December 8, 2003, on the Sci-Fi Channel (*Battlestar Galactica* 2003), since rebranded as Syfy. The miniseries re-envisioned a science fiction show that had lasted a single network television season, from 1978–1979 (*Battlestar Galactica* 1978). According to this newer version of the

story, human beings had long ago created Cylons as sturdy robots that could perform military and labor functions that people wanted to avoid. However, the Cylons rebel, leading eventually to a truce that enforces separation between Cylons and people. During this time apart, Cylons evolve into a more advanced, life-based form—cyborgs with bodies and behaviors effectively indistinguishable from those of human beings—that could reproduce with humans and feature a shared, renewable, or downloadable consciousness across similar networked models that essentially nullifies death. In this more durable, formidable condition, they determine to wipe out humanity (“Episode #1.1” December 8, 2003; “Episode #1.2” December 9, 2003).

Battlestar Galactica premiered as a regularly scheduled sci-fi series on January 14, 2005 (Battlestar Galactica 2004). Ever since, popular press and academic criticism has consistently regarded the series as a thought-provoking exposition of the social and political concerns dominating American life in the wake of September 11 (Marshall and Potter 2008; Pinedo 2008, 176; Stoy 2010, 7, 8–9).⁶ Arguing that “Science fiction is meant to be provocative; it is meant to make us question aspects of the world in which we live” (9), Marshall and Potter (2008) contend that *Battlestar Galactica* raised such questions by showcasing exigencies in which main characters must negotiate the parameters of fraught contemporary issues, including terrorism, torture, and religious fervor (5–8). Indeed, executive producer and screenwriter Ronald D. Moore construes the show as ““naturalistic science fiction”” (qtd. in Marshall and Potter, 5), viewing the genre as engaging with a comprehensive range of contemporary concerns (through its “naturalistic” taming of otherwise potentially extraordinary “science fiction” trappings) while avoiding simplistic moral binaries (6). Marshall and Potter (2008) describe the show as moving “toward a dialogic relationship...representing the world not merely as it is, or as it should be. *BSG* comments on contemporary culture by imagining dystopic alternatives, and by doing so it invites the viewer to interrogate notions of self, nation, and belief” (6). Similarly, Ott (2008) affirms that “science fiction is inevitably about the culture that produced it” (16), with this show “furnish[ing] viewers with a vocabulary and thus with a set of symbolic resources for managing their social anxieties.” For Ott, like Marshall and Potter, “*BSG* invites viewers to adopt a critical, self-reflective frame toward our post-9/11 world” (14) by providing an alternative discourse to Bush’s moral certitude⁷ (25). Ott perceives a highly interactive relationship between fictional series and its viewers watching from

the real world, asserting that “*BSG* does not claim to have the answers to tough moral questions; it claims only that asking such questions is imperative. Through its rhetoric of ambivalence and the trope of metaphor, *BSG* solicits viewers to look at themselves, to interrogate their complicity in the contemporary political environment, and to connect memory to conscience” (25). At the same time, Rawle (2010) traces within the show a kind of moral ambivalence and ambiguous heroism that seems symptomatic of contemporary culture (138–151). In these ways, like the literary fiction reviewed in the previous chapter, televisual fiction can serve as a site for negotiating complex issues with material political implications.

However, like DeLillo’s work—albeit through analogy, rather than mimesis—*Battlestar Galactica* centers on a peacetime, unanticipated attack whose magnitude leads to proliferating aftereffects. Similar to what happened on September 11, the series begins with a pivotal, destructive moment in the history of a people whose aftermath response is determined not only by this fundamentally changing event but also their continued engagement with its perpetrators.⁸ In fact, Bigsby (2013) quotes Moore at length regarding this conscious intention for the series to serve as a medium through which viewers question their beliefs about and relationship specifically to September 11:

What happens to the people in *Galactica*[...]is what happened to us in September...it feels like what we’ll be able to do is play out the psychic and emotional reverberations of that kind of apocalypse through the characters and through the series’ [... The *Battlestar Galactica* miniseries was] informed by a lot of 9/11 memories, 9/11 feelings. (qtd. in Bigsby 274)

Accordingly, Bigsby traces what happens on the show to an originating event of violence whose horror seems, like a fetish, perpetual, asserting that “Many of the dilemmas faced by the characters in *Battlestar Galactica* would be generated by the sudden attack that had generated a tension between moral principle and military necessity” (279). With this premise in mind, *Battlestar Galactica*’s plot unfolds with explicit attention to contemporary concerns but through a fixation on fate and choice manifested through debates about the extent and limits of any individual’s or community’s control over their own circumstances and future (Casey 2008, 237–250).

Over the two nights of the miniseries, viewers watched as the Cylons almost entirely obliterate humanity by nuking the “Twelve Colonies,” or

the twelve planets that human beings inhabit. Characters regard this devastation as unimaginable, unforeseen, and unprecedented for a civilization complacently prosperous from a long period of peace, as evoked by frequent references to “the end of the world” as well as—for contemporary viewers—the eerily reminiscent scene of Gaius Baltar (James Callis) watching chaotic newscasts of the attacks on his vertical, oblong, twin-paneled television screens. Yet as Commander William Adama (Edward James Olmos) presages in the calm of a ceremony before the onslaught, we—certainly the collective of the Twelve Colonies but also perhaps viewers as well—can never truly avoid the consequences of our actions. Indeed, with personal memories haunting him and the other protagonists, and aesthetic traces of the original series haunting the new show’s sets, costumes, and props,⁹ the past—in an echo of DeLillo’s *Falling Man* meditations—seems inseparable from and formative for the present, however extraordinary the present might seem (“Episode #1.1” December 8, 2003; “Episode #1.2” December 9, 2003).

As the show progresses, viewers learn that the Cylons had developed a deep faith in a single God that not only countered human beliefs in multiple gods but also justified for them their decision to exterminate what they regarded as the faithless betrayers of this one, true God. Yet, on the other side of the coin, among the few human survivors who now wander through space seeking shelter, religious conviction proves an equally compelling concern. On the side of faith resides Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell), a relatively low-level cabinet appointee who becomes the Twelve Colonies’ president after the Cylon attack kills all the other candidates above her and who has just prior to that attack been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. Her leadership and very life status seem to depend on sheer chance, unless of course there is a higher purpose guiding these developments, and she is open to trusting that a mythical planet called Earth, long revered within their belief system but never historically validated as a real place, is their destined home. At the same time, hardened personalities like the fleet’s new military commander-by-default Admiral Adama long doubt not only that Earth exists but also that cultivating hope in its promise can be productive. These elements—cataclysmic destruction, summed up by the tagline, “The world is over. The fight has just begun” (*Battlestar Galactica* 2004); conflict between the once exploited and their former exploiters; and high-consequence investments in divergent worldview certainties, from religious to secular absolutism—provide parallel, though not necessarily mirror, reflections of real-world, September 11-related

anxieties about unprecedented destruction, its causes, and its implications for the individual wondering what influence he or she, or any other guiding force, has over these life- and world-altering events (see also Edwards 2006; Gilmore 2009; Ryan 2006; Weiss 2006).

Like *Lost* in many ways (see Bigsby 2013, 263; Gilmore 2009; Havrilesky 2006; Stoy 2010, 26, 30, 31; Weiss 2006), *Battlestar Galactica* persistently echoes the same preoccupations with the notion of fate. All characters in *Battlestar Galactica*, like those in *Lost*, wrestle to some extent with existential uncertainties about how they ended up where they are and where they will be going. However, as noted earlier, disagreement over the relevance and force of destiny fuels an ongoing dispute, reminiscent of that between Locke and Jack, between President Roslin and Admiral Adama about how to safely direct the fleet preserving the last of the human race. For Roslin, like *Lost*'s Locke, some transcendent power supports and guides these endangered individuals toward an ideal fulfillment, a redemption that will render meaningful the suffering they have endured. For Adama, like *Lost*'s Jack, responsible guardianship of the endangered individuals in his care means *not* presuming there can or will be any deus ex machina to solve or compensate for the threats they have faced. "Sometimes a Great Notion" (January 16, 2009), a dark episode in the final season of a dark series, showcases the despair pervading the dwindling survivors when choice guided by destiny seems to lead them to a literal dead end, a barren, uninhabitable Earth marred by an ancient nuclear war. In this instance, Officer Anastasia Dualla (Kandyse McClure) stages her resistance to such dependence on cruel fortune by enjoying a last, joyful meal with her love Lee Adama (Jamie Bamber) and later savoring the memory of that joy as she takes her own life. Her choice of suicide from the heroic posture of self-determination poses a problematic defiance of fate. Yet, like *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica* concludes with an ultimate recognition and acceptance of fate as both initiating and ending the characters' journeys, both physical and metaphysical—with the sense of eternal recurrence, or the plot of destruction as endlessly reiterated, consciously articulated by the characters of *Battlestar Galactica*, whose scriptures have stipulated that "All this has happened before, and all this will happen again" ("Sometimes a Great Notion" January 16, 2009; "Daybreak: Part 1" March 13, 2009; "Daybreak: Part 2" March 20, 2009). And so, *Battlestar Galactica*'s serial re-presentations of this fundamental tension between fate and choice under life-, even

species-threatening, circumstances afford a fetishized crystallization and repetition of September 11's component horrors of vulnerability, dubious heroism, and looming mortality.

FLASHFORWARD: "NO MORE GOOD DAYS"

FlashForward's single season premiered on ABC in the United States on September 24, 2009, with an episode titled, "No More Good Days." Like *Lost*, the series begins with a close-up shot drawing viewer attention to a man's face. He comes to consciousness on a pavement littered with broken glass in a silence soon broken by the troubling distant sounds of car alarms and screaming. This man, the show's protagonist, FBI agent Mark Benford (Joseph Fiennes), then scrambles to emerge from an overturned vehicle to gain an unobstructed view of total, baffling urban chaos. He eventually learns that while he was pursuing a terrorist suspect with his partner Demetri Noh (John Cho) on the L.A. roadways, he, and everyone else in the world, inexplicably blacked out for two minutes and seventeen seconds. During that time, each person glimpsed a two-minute, seventeen-second clip of their life on the same day, April 29, 2010. Each person, that is, except for a few like Noh who saw nothing at all, is later understood to have died before that future date ("No More Good Days").

After regaining consciousness on this otherwise ordinary but beautiful, clear-blue-sky September morning, characters feel they have returned to a changed world. Planes crashed into skyscrapers and cars driven off bridges during humanity's incapacity are among the most visible, immediate emergencies. But equally compelling become the blackout visions themselves, which present each character with a personal future that they either welcome or fear. For example, while misgivings plague those like Noh who are presumed to be deceased by April 29, Dr. Bryce Varley (Zachary Knighton) foresees a rendezvous with an as-yet unknown love interest, giving him a reason to live just as he was about to commit suicide. As a result, as the FBI begins investigating what caused the blackout and all main characters begin questioning whether what they have seen for themselves is inevitable, they all become concerned about whether or not the future can be revised. Individuals want to know whether the fortune or misfortune they have foreseen is guaranteed, and investigators want to know whether the blackout itself might recur ("No More Good Days" September 24, 2009). For the blackout's survivors, seeing the future has imbued the intermediate days with a sense of predestination. For those

who do not like what they have seen (or have not seen), that sense of finalized fate feels like the doom of “no more good days.”

Co-creator David S. Goyer, a story writer for *The Dark Knight*, explicitly roots his vision for *FlashForward* in his own memory of September 11, 2001. He recalls being in France and encountering an “outpouring of sympathy...I thought, obviously, it was horrendous, but it was also, for this one moment...this profoundly kind of connecting experience for a lot of the world.” In this way, by focusing the series on that “one moment... [that] brief period of time” (qtd. in Topel 2009) that produced substantial global consequences, Goyer states directly that this show is engaged in reproducing such a scenario and the communal and existential implications it poses (see also Singh 2010). Often compared to *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* as a science fiction or fantasy consideration of contemporary, real-world events through the lens of at-risk individuals and communities (Bellafante 2009; King 2009; Ryan 2009), *FlashForward* showcases the crisis-generated fixation on fate that it shares with those shows (the shows also share actors: Sonya Walger and Dominic Monaghan appeared in *Lost* and James Callis was in *Battlestar Galactica*). However, unlike those series, *FlashForward* foregoes prominent leadership rivalries based on polarized positions to highlight individuated angst, with all characters struggling similarly between the extremities of absolute choice and absolute destiny without embracing either with total surety. This pervasive ambivalence about a potentially self-fulfilling future, as well as the overall plot concern with whether other blackouts will occur to cast anew these individual existential crises, infuses the series with a sense of compulsive, or fetishized, fascination with an unresolved state of constrained choice and personal insecurity.

FBI agent Al Gough’s (Lee Thompson Young) actions present the grimmet example of this struggle. In an episode featuring the bureau’s investigation of the “Blue Hand” movement, an underground community whose clubs accommodate the extreme, flirting-with-death indulgences of those seemingly fated to die before April 29, the show centralizes the question of whether anyone can escape the flashforward-revealed future. While the apparently doomed “already ghosts” of the Blue Hands embrace fatalism with abandon, Gough becomes committed to finding “a way to change the game.” In a note to the presumably ill-fated Noh, Gough insists, “There is always a way out.” Afraid of a future in which he has accidentally killed a young mother, Gough himself turns to suicide as the only way to ensure this does not happen. After spending an evening care-

fully preparing and relishing his favorite homemade meal—a gesture reminiscent of Officer Dualla’s pre-suicide celebration of life—Gough shows up for work the next day only to jump off the roof of his office building. As one among many characters carrying a gun, in a series that begins with another character attempting suicide with a gun, the choice to jump seems somewhat unusual (“The Gift” November 5, 2009). Yet this ultimate sacrifice—through an action troublingly reminiscent of the very public, disconcerting deaths of those who jumped from the World Trade Center towers on September 11—demonstrates the complexity of negotiating choice versus fate. After all, he feared that any choices he made while alive would fatefully lead to the young mother’s death, so he decided instead to remove himself entirely from any possibility of choosing wrongly. Does his ability to circumvent a predicted future evidence free will? Or does the fact that he felt only death could prevent him from fulfilling his destiny make the case for determinism? In light of his act’s resemblance to what many people had been forced to choose to do on September 11 to escape certain death by smoke and fire, such questions pose particularly relevant contemporary quandaries. Although the show was canceled after only one season, the finale ended with another blackout fostering more flashforwards (“Future Shock”), suggesting that the similar philosophical impasses that permeated every week of this show would never fully be resolved, perpetuating a fetish that incarnated repeatedly core September 11 quandaries of helplessness, imperfect heroism, and inescapable mortality.

ANTI-HEROES, NO-WIN SCENARIOS, AND THE END OF THE WORLD

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, more than a few other television shows—as well as films, which will be broached in the next chapter—shared and at times elaborated these perseverations over questions of imperfect heroism, helplessness, and inescapable mortality, with a proliferation of anti-heroes, or morally flawed protagonists; no-win scenarios, or conditions under which there is no possibility for a character to make a choice that will result in a “happy ending”; and world-ending threats. Routinely, the true “no-win” scenario features constraints whereby a character cannot produce an unproblematically heroic outcome. Such situations do not only involve risk or close calls; in such situations, the character must, at best, make a trade-off, exchanging one kind of harm for another, rather than ever being able to achieve any kind of cost-free rescue or safety.

And often, the fate of the world or all of humanity is at stake. While such a scenario frequently serves as a plot device within a variety of stories, within these films and TV programs, this bind either recurs endlessly or provides a centerpiece, defining trope. For this reason, I link such despair and defeatism to the kinds of horrors—the unforeseen and unavoidable deaths in profoundly gruesome ways—witnessed on September 11, and which complement the kinds of fatalism already addressed in this chapter. Certainly, the next chapter on *The Dark Knight*¹⁰ will focus more closely on how that film dwells on problematic heroism and the title character's struggle across one lose-lose hurdle after another to navigate the divide between the means justifying the ends versus the ends justifying the means. However, here I will spend some time on how these concerns have manifested through two additional televised series, which suggest just how widely and for how long television—across networks, genres, and kinds of viewers—has attended to such concerns.

As noted earlier, the pilot episode of *Lost* begins with an extreme close-up shot of the opening eye of its protagonist, Jack Shephard (“Pilot: Part 1” September 22, 2004). This particular shot is notable for signaling the series’ ongoing interest in the shaping and impact of each character’s personal perspective. Subjectivity importantly anchors *Lost*, as does hope for its plane-crash, island-stranded survivors (*Lost* 2004–2010). On the other hand, the Season Three premiere of AMC’s zombie apocalypse serial *The Walking Dead* (which began in 2010) opens with an extreme close-up shot of the clouded, dead eye of a zombie (“Seed” October 14, 2012). Zombies are known on this show and in horror lore generally as being hollow, unthinking shells of the once-living, compelled to act only by the basic need of eating to survive. They have no recognizable subjectivity. They are dead. There is no “there” there. And unlike *Lost*’s main characters, this show’s survivors have no hope (*The Walking Dead* 2010–present). At the end of the previous season, they have learned (as did viewers) that they too will inescapably become zombies when they die. For some as-yet unknown reason, even if they are never scratched or bitten by what they call a “walker,” they carry within themselves the seed of whatever will make them undead (“Beside the Dying Fire” March 18, 2012). The world as we know it is over, and even if anyone can rough it through the aftermath, there will be no escape from the worst possible outcome. *The Walking Dead*—not unlike DeLillo’s *Falling Man*—is about inevitability and about succumbing, about the matter of when, not if, the worst will happen.

Supernatural features substantially different characters and narratives than *The Walking Dead*. Airing on The CW since 2005, the urban legend/horror-based show follows two brothers, Dean (Jensen Ackles) and Sam (Jared Padalecki) Winchester, who, as “hunters,” combat supernatural forces and monsters to protect vulnerable human beings. They are at times morally flawed, sometimes reluctant heroes. Their foes include both heaven and hell, with human beings such as themselves stuck in the middle and getting the brunt of every demon’s ill will and angel’s indifference. As hunters, they know the supernatural world well, and they fight all the dangers it presents to humanity without pay or any kind of recognition from a world that otherwise fails to acknowledge the reality of the strange beings they fight (*Supernatural*). Equally consistently, they face conditions that, no matter what they choose, will result in an undesired outcome. In accurate, yet evocative terms, they have had to sell their souls to save one another. Or allow their bodies to be inhabited by Satan in order to save the world. Or, on a regular basis, kill the living, innocent human vessel in which a demon resides to prevent that demon from orchestrating worse destruction and harm to others. They often talk about getting out of the “family business,” and each has been able to do so for a period of time. But escape is never for long, and it is always with the awareness that the supernatural beings they once combatted continue to wreak havoc while either brother tries for a “normal life.” Their family and friends die; they flirt with addictions to alcohol or worse; and they spend time in hell and purgatory amidst violence and torture. And all the while, they must contend with the conviction that everything would be even worse if they stopped fighting altogether (*Supernatural* 2005–present). Like *The Walking Dead*, this show envisions the no-win scenario as an inescapable fact of the living, and the dead.

So, back to *The Walking Dead*. The series has a protagonist, Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln), who is regarded from the beginning as a brave, good-hearted, well-meaning caretaker of a small band of human survivors of a zombie apocalypse. Yet members of that group continue to die. They are, after all, survivors of an apocalypse. They face not only countless zombies but also other survivors who are not so well-meaning themselves. Over time, Rick—particularly Rick, as leader—and others in the group increasingly contend with whether or not the aspirations of pre-disaster justice that have guided their post-disaster behavior are ineffective or even dangerous to themselves and their loved ones. In later seasons, Rick and especially Carol Peletier (Melissa McBride) take actions that once would

have been unthinkable to them and eerily echo threats once directed at them. Perhaps the moral rules of ordinary life before no longer apply when the stakes are so high, the enemy so formidable, and the outcome so uncertain...or do they? This central question plagues Rick and his tenuous community. And, I argue, us as well.

CONCLUSION: ENDURING CRISIS IN POST-SEPTEMBER 11 AMERICAN TELEVISION

Mainstream audiences and critics have often regarded science fiction, like the fantasy genre that might more accurately apply to *Lost* and *FlashForward*, as well as the horror genre that applies to *The Walking Dead* and *Supernatural*, with skepticism, if not outright scorn, for depicting unrealistic settings and situations. Yet Stoy (2010) points out that “genre fiction can be art” (31). As Nancy Franklin suggests in a 2006 issue of *The New Yorker*, “If you switch to the term ‘speculative fiction’... the genre seems more interesting.”¹¹ Such an imaginative, alternate-reality framework affords greater leeway for fiction to draw mainstream audiences into pursuing questions like “‘What if?’ and ‘What then?’ and ‘Who are we?’” to their most expansive and possibly controversial limits (Franklin; see also Havrilesky 2006; Ryan 2006). In its 2006 debut season, the series *Heroes* sported the tagline, “Save the cheerleader. Save the world” (“Heroes”; see also Stabile 2009, 88; Stanley 2006; Owen 2006) while dwelling on the kinds of questions regarding fate and choice (Shores 2009, 66–78; Johnson 2009b, 110–112) that have preoccupied the series considered here. Similarly, Fox’s *Fringe* (2008–2013)—another product of *Lost* executive producer J. J. Abrams—featured characters and plot developments that were premised on the constraints of choice interrelated with fate and the continuing threat of universes ending, with the still-standing World Trade Center towers marking the difference between dimensions with alternate histories. And in 2009, *V*’s premiere explicitly invoked a preoccupation with the fallout of a certain day after which the world will never be the same by prefiguring the fictional appearance of alien spaceships over major international cities with references to the real-world crises of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination and September 11, 2001 (“Pilot” November 3, 2009). These shows are only a few among many interested in the “What if?” and “What then?” and “Who are we?” questions under the highest-stake circumstances that aired on television in

the wake of September 11 in the first decade of the twenty-first century (see also Zurawik 2009).

Lost, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *FlashForward* emblemize this fascination within popular culture with the nature and fallout of extreme crisis. They also emblemize popular culture's ability to occasion for mainstream viewers engagement with the most crucial and disturbing dilemmas that extreme crisis raises. Their reiterations of the core horrors dominating September 11—utter helplessness, unavoidable mortality, and heroism-at-a-price—effectively fetishized catastrophe by repeatedly foregrounding without resolving the tensions between choice and fate, between incidental survival and inescapable death, without purporting to offer any clear therapeutic value. Indeed, each show ultimately concludes with an only ambivalently happy or decisive ending: *Lost* ends with its characters reunited, but in a post-death limbo perhaps preceding reincarnation into another shared life (“The End” May 23, 2010); *Battlestar Galactica* finishes with its characters reaching their mythological destination, Earth, but only after a few more deaths and with survivors facing the hazards of survival under prehistoric conditions (“Daybreak: Part 1” March 13, 2009; “Daybreak: Part 2” March 20, 2009)¹²; and *FlashForward* ends with the apparent death of protagonist Mark Benford, while everyone else on the planet succumbs to another round of angst-producing flashforwards (“Future Shock” May 27, 2010). Such stories suggest that sometimes things are not all right or not put fully to rights, and living in tension with ever-present risk is the best that we can expect—conceptions of the world at odds with the senses of idealism, self-determination, and justice associated with traditionally dominant US narratives like the “American Dream.” In this way, these three television series and others airing in the mid- to late-2000s have served as extended engagements with the particular dilemmas of existential insecurity and doom showcased by the public deaths of September 11. They have signaled emergent structures of feeling that imbue the first decade after September 11 with the pervasive unsettlement of cultural trauma.

NOTES

1. Differently, Lynn Spigel (2004) has argued that, in spite of claims in the immediate wake of September 11 that television—like everything else—would never be the same, programming returned read-

- ily to familiar forms amenable to connecting viewers to nationalist narratives.
2. Reverence for the emergency personnel who lost their lives on September 11 presented one way to mitigate the horror of their deaths through a narrative emphasizing their inspiring self-sacrifice. I argue here that television compulsively presented alternative narratives that fixated on loss of choice, which complicates the notion of “heroism” and any comfort it might provide.
 3. Girard and Meulemans (2008) argue that this subjective view, which integrates characters’ pasts and presents and persists throughout the series for each of the main characters, foregrounds a preoccupation with the nature, possibilities, and constraints of choice (89).
 4. Lee (2008) characterizes Jack as an “empiricist” committed to free will to a sometimes problematic extent, such as those times when he perseveres in lost causes to prove himself capable of heroism (63–66). In contrast, Lee notes Locke’s tendency toward faith as well as, at times, gullibility (66–70).
 5. In the second season, Jack’s and Locke’s intense disagreements pivot around whether pushing a button on an old computer in the “Hatch,” a remnant of the long-defunct research-oriented Dharma Initiative, will prevent the world from ending (*Lost* 2004–2010).
 6. Stoy (2010) details the show’s favorable critical reception and substantive cultural impact (1–2; 6–11; 23–33). Bigsby (2013) points out that in 2009, “the United Nations held a special discussion of the series and its engagement with issues of terrorism, war, human rights, religion and reconciliation” (293). Marshall and Potter (2008) situate *Battlestar Galactica* within economic developments in the first decade of the twenty-first century that have fostered a proliferation of “quality” television (4).
 7. Kellner (2004) asserts that mainstream media presented, unfiltered and unchallenged, Bush’s rigid moral justifications for policy responses to September 11 (46–51), a critique about news broadcasts that can sometimes be read as generalizing to all of television, which this chapter’s discussion complicates.
 8. Ryman (2010) characterizes *Battlestar Galactica* as “America in 2003, after the catastrophe of 9/11” (41).
 9. Bigsby (2013) attributes the similarities between the show and these elements, as well as between the show and real-world objects

- and behaviors, to a self-conscious attempt to prepare viewers to feel seamlessly familiar with what transpires (282).
10. Stoy (2010) sees *Battlestar Galactica* as initiating the tendency toward ominous reimaginings of older stories and characters (11) and, with *Lost*, the critical receptiveness for such approaches that will characterize *The Dark Knight* (31).
 11. Wetmore (2012) traces the concept of “speculative fiction” to Robert Heinlein, who used the term to refer not only to science fiction but also to “fantasy, the supernatural, superheroes, alternate history, and post-apocalyptic, utopian and dystopian worlds” (4).
 12. Differently, Casey (2008) reads the pattern of “eternal return” with optimism, as “hope” (244–249).

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“Nothing to Do with All Your Strength”: Power, Choice, and September 11 in *The Dark Knight*

INTRODUCTION: AMBIVALENT HEROICS, *THE DARK KNIGHT*, AND SEPTEMBER 11

Bruce Wayne is not a well man, and the city he tries nightly to save made him that way. Over a casual dinner conversation in the 2008 Warner Bros. film *The Dark Knight*,¹ when someone doubts that corrupt and violent Gotham City could be a healthy place for raising children, Wayne (Christian Bale) jokes, “I was raised here, I turned out OK.” The irony succinctly and playfully summarizes the billionaire’s evolution from child victim to adult vigilante. One among the many of Gotham’s criminals had robbed and murdered his parents as he, a mere child, stood beside them. Soon after, the young Wayne vowed vengeance by committing his life to fighting crime (Vaz 1989, xiii–xiv). His sweeping vendetta, a choice to act against all criminals in response to the violation of one, commuted his personal loss into a grander purpose: to thwart the very possibility of victimization from violence. Accordingly, it could be viewed simply as a selfless and civic-minded approach, if not for the form “this weird figure of the dark...this avenger of evil” (xiv) later takes. Ultimately, his methods in

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disguise as the Batman, an incarnation of fear to intimidate vice, unsettle any reassurance that his post-traumatic endeavors fully redeem his orphaning or entirely forestall the injury of others. After all, his investment in perpetually re-engaging with the criminal encounter—albeit to change the outcome he could not alter in his youth—necessarily implicates him in the moral quandaries any use of force entails. For this reason, the ongoing tale of the superhero driven to make right what long ago went drastically wrong has raised lasting questions about the scope and limits of ethical power.

The 2005 film *Batman Begins*² introduces director and screenplay co-writer Christopher Nolan's conception of how these questions drive the Batman narrative while resonating with contemporary viewer concerns. This "reboot," or updating of the at-the-time 66-year-old comic book character,³ focuses on how Bruce Wayne comes to develop a sense of justice to undergird actions that began, and could still be construed, as vigilantism. The story follows Wayne's maturation from frightened, vengeful boy to disciplined, principled man, with his wealthy parents' celebrated altruism eventually superseding their fate as the legacy that haunts his behavior. In the end, Wayne decides to look to the well-being of his community, rather than the settling of an individual score, as the measure of fulfillment of the vow he spoke on his late parents' behalf. However, the film concludes with the newly minted Lieutenant Gordon (Gary Oldman), Batman's lone ally on the compromised Gotham police force, wondering after they have just narrowly averted an evil master-minded plot against the city: "What about escalation?" Pointing to the as-yet unnamed Joker's "calling card," Gordon speculates that Batman's fierce and uncompromising assault on criminals could actually heighten the modes and the stakes of combating crime (*Batman Begins*). In the context of any "war on crime," and certainly in the midst of the War on Terror, Gordon's caution strikes a certain resonance for viewers familiar with the arguments for and against "taking a hard line" to promote security. In the context of Batman's freelance interventions, the final scene throws this film's resolution into doubt, setting the terms for the next installment's crises.

Indeed, the Catch-22 of escalation dominates *The Dark Knight*, particularly in the context of September 11, 2001, and its aftermath, a context acutely attuned to predicaments of power and ethics. Allusions to September 11 abound in *The Dark Knight*. A promotional poster for the film's theatrical release, which now serves as DVD cover art, featured a bat-shaped fiery crash zone penetrating the upper floors of a skyscraper's

façade. The image, reminiscent of the plane-produced penetrations of the World Trade Center towers, appears nowhere in the actual film, foregrounding a provocative self-consciousness in how the project invokes September 11 (Cox 2008; Dawson 2008; Dudley 2008; Moore 2008). In fact, settings and scenarios persistently echo the crises of Manhattan on that particular day and throughout its wake, which many movie reviewers acknowledged (Stevens 2008; Tyree 2009), with a few considering such references somewhat heavy-handed (Cox 2008). Specifically, some argued fervently that its themes transparently favored the Bush administration’s War on Terror in response to September 11 (Ackerman 2008; Klavan 2008), and some argued just as fervently that the film exposed this response’s flaws (Baker 2008; Binh 2008; Dray 2008; Orr 2008). These divergent perceptions of a single text point to the richness of a narrative that can elicit entirely opposed, yet equally committed, reactions. Importantly, for many—including myself—this richness reflects a text positioned in the unkempt middle, where patently right answers fail to reside and choices must be made without the luxury of self-righteous reassurance (Bradley 2008; Crouse 2008; Dargis 2008; Eisenberg 2008; Kerstein 2008; Rickey 2008; Schager 2008; Stevens 2008). Indeed, director and screenplay co-writer Christopher Nolan has demurred about deliberately producing an explicit September 11 text (Eisenberg 2008).⁴ Instead, he has portrayed the film as an evocative medium through which viewers can struggle with issues well-grounded in Batman’s fictionalized history yet well-suited to our own historical realities (Boucher October 27, 2008a; see also Kerstein 2008).⁵

In effect, much like the television shows discussed earlier, references to September 11 infuse *The Dark Knight*’s plot so the film can serve as a fictional but fraught confrontation with that event as a cultural trauma that has confounded conventional moral certainties. Like the viewers of those shows, as well as the readers of *Falling Man* and the oral histories considered at the beginning of this study, almost all viewers of the theatrical release, depending on their experiences of that day, can be considered witnesses (and some might be survivors) of September 11. Accordingly, the film’s numerous, direct parallels with that day’s images and challenges impel viewers to bring their experiences with September 11 into their encounter with the film’s fictional traumatic moments. However, *The Dark Knight* avoids offering viewers any “feel-good” or ethically satisfying resolutions to the troubles it dramatizes through this connection between the film, the viewers, and September 11. Instead, this connection

incites viewers to interrogate their own moral orientations in relationship to the film's staged exigencies and, by extension, their involvement in or even contributions to counterpart real-world exigencies: the kind of complex, ambiguous choices or even lose-lose scenarios that September 11 has occasioned. Trauma is already fundamental to the Batman story. However, this film features distinct elements of the cultural trauma of September 11—the violations of once-fundamental dominant cultural presumptions about security, self-determination, and ethical action—including the depiction of The Joker as a terrorist, the protagonists as constrained by problematic choices, and the city of Gotham itself as implicated in its own vulnerability and potential for strength. In effect, the film openly alludes to September 11, links these allusions to Gotham's security concerns and moral susceptibilities as well as to “good guys” Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale), Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), and Harvey Dent's (Aaron Eckhart) repeated struggles with The Joker's (Heath Ledger) relentless morally taxing scenarios—which are sustained, if not propelled, by the city's ambivalences—and uses these depictions of the Gotham community's risks and responsibilities to implicitly call on viewers to recognize their own risks and responsibilities in the analogous crisis of September 11. In this way, this popular culture text explores and involves its viewers in the culturally traumatic complexities of agency and accountability in the wake of September 11.

TRAUMA AS THE BATMAN ORIGIN STORY

In Bob Kane's inaugurating comic, “The Legend of the Batman—Who He Is and How He Came to Be,” the panel following Thomas and Martha Wayne's murders records that their “boy's eyes are wide with terror and shock as the horrible scene is spread before him” (qtd. in Vaz 1989, xiv). Similarly, in *Batman Begins*, young Bruce Wayne is stunned by his parents' deaths beside him. Yet three additional factors, not presented in the original comic, intervene in the film between this crisis and Wayne's consequent simmering impulse to battle crime: his loving relationship with a father devoted to the care of both his family and his suffering city, a murderer evidently driven by desperation, and a boy's self-blame for his parent's demise. After all, Wayne's fear of bats, aggravated by the set and costumes of an opera his family attends one evening, leads him to plead for an early departure from the performance. Just after they emerge onto the deserted nighttime city street, a jumpy mugger ends up pulling his gun's

trigger when he misinterprets Thomas's effort to shield his wife from harm as a threatening gesture. Immediately after, Martha's frantic reaction to her husband's shooting provokes the same panicked response from the apparently inadvertent killer (*Batman Begins* 2005). And so Bruce Wayne is orphaned in a robbery gone awry, by the kind of destitute man his city's financial woes have created and his family's philanthropies have striven to support, in a time and place occasioned by his own vulnerabilities.

There are no easy explanations or justifications for this sort of misfortune, especially for a child. Yet Wayne finds one way for it all to make sense: he tells the family butler Alfred (Michael Caine) it was his fault for putting them at risk. Alfred immediately corrects him, insisting, "It was him, and him alone." However, in adulthood, Wayne admits only that his anger has since overshadowed his guilt, revealing a qualified acceptance of Alfred's admonition (*Batman Begins* 2005). At an impressionable age, Wayne has been introduced to the murky morality of a world in which—wealthy and poor, privileged and disadvantaged—we are not entirely free actors, with options constrained often by circumstances or resources, yet in which we still must live with the consequences of the choices that we make. What kind of an impact could such a revelation have on a young boy, especially one with the means to pursue or indulge any and all forms of solace, regardless of whether they prove salutary or licit?

Interestingly, Bruce Wayne's trajectory from child victim to adult crime fighter accords with contemporary understandings of the traumatic recovery process. Traumatic ordeals prompt within survivors a need to re-calibrate their life expectations in light of their newly intimate awareness of living in a world of risk. In particular, in the wake of perpetrated violence, Janoff-Bulman (1992) points out that survivors particularly confront "a breakdown in interpersonal trust, a newfound perception of the interpersonal world as hostile and dangerous" (79). They must "suddenly confront the existence of evil...question the trustworthiness of people... and question their own role in the victimization" (78). They now recognize through personal involvement, however unwitting, something most stable social orders seek to manage or at least to mask: that human beings harm, and mean to harm, other human beings. From this perspective, traumatic events corrupt an individual's sense of being and acting in an intelligible world, requiring reconstruction of that individual's subjective coherence, productive agency, and responsible orientation toward him- or herself and others.

In the fallout of this radical uncertainty about who one is, what one can do, and what one should do or should have done, survivors and witnesses develop feelings of self-blame and guilt. Janoff-Bulman (1992) distinguishes between “characterological self-blame,” through which individuals attribute their traumatic harm to their own enduring, inherent, deficient personal qualities, and “behavioral self-blame,” through which individuals attribute their trauma to their own errant choices. While characterological self-blame reinforces individuals’ views of themselves as helpless and therefore troubles recovery, behavioral self-blame enhances individuals’ views of themselves as autonomous and in fact—comparatively speaking—can aid their recovery (125–130). After all, a survivor might reason, what could have been avoided in the past can be avoided in the future, a vision much more encouraging than the sense that harm can happen at any time to anyone, without warning or hope of evasion. For Bruce Wayne, continually re-entering moments of danger as a well-trained, well-armed combatant capable of single-handedly defeating criminals seems to offer the chance to nullify his childhood’s paradox of feeling both responsible for his parents’ fate yet also unable to prevent it.⁶ Yet, as *The Dark Knight* dramatizes, vindication through Batman’s crime fighting proves problematic for him, his friends, and the city of Gotham.

STAGING SEPTEMBER 11 AS A CULTURAL TRAUMA

Understandably, then, Bruce Wayne’s world could be described as irrevocably altered by the trauma of his parents’ murders. Their deaths ensured that his family life would be materially different, and his subsequent vow to fight crime signaled the direction his radical new view of the world would take. Yet after September 11, many who were not immediately affected by the attacks reported the same stunned sense that “the world had changed.” This notion of cultural trauma invokes questions of subjectivity, agency, and responsibility under conditions of imposed constraints and limited, perhaps exclusively adverse, options—the very concerns that dominate Bruce Wayne’s dilemmas as Batman, albeit manifesting in *The Dark Knight* in forms attuned to real-world precipitating crises. This echoes what earlier chapters have discussed, with popular press oral histories and both literary and televisual fiction all having similarly fixated post-September 11 on mortal vulnerability and inescapable fate in the form of no-win scenarios, problematic heroism, and ambivalence about individual

autonomy, even under the most critical circumstances and in relation to ethical decision-making.

Within this context, *The Dark Knight* engages through a particular medium—film—concerns that were informing other kinds of representations and audiences as the decade unfolded. Just as fictional representation through literature seemed to take a few years to emerge in force, film production also took some time to develop (see Prince 2009, 1–2); the earliest movies to appear tended to adhere to documentary or docudrama forms. However, like the other texts reviewed here, as the 2000s moved forward, the increased number and range of offerings warranted critical attention to how film participates in the political discourse of the decade, with scholars taking a variety of distinct positions regarding overall trends and effects. A significant component of such critique has viewed the media as complicit in Bush administration characterizations of September 11 and, accordingly, its policies of response. Specifically, Duvall and Marzec (2015) focus on how “contemporary narrative can make legible a moment in US history when, in the aftermath of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the forces of nationalism, the media, and capital worked in concert to mobilize support for the notion of just wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and for curtailing civil rights at home” (1). For them, “post-9/11 narratives help make visible the fantasies that supposedly necessitate the ongoing state of exception and American exceptionalism” (1). In other words—and the term “mobilize” is quite explicit about this—movies organized public endorsement of extreme measures through the guise of state-directed and state-serving wish fulfillment. At the very least, though, the thematic preoccupations discussed here complicate any notion of a straightforward, unidirectional imposition of ideology by recognizing the extent to which extreme measures—state-oriented and state-driven, or not—might not have been an unfamiliar, tough, or unwelcome sell (or needed to be sold at all) to readers and viewers experiencing existential and ethical susceptibilities and uncertainties.

More nuanced approaches have perceived tensions in post-September 11 cinema between nationalism, political critique, and attempts to negotiate between the two (Westwell 2014, 16). Markert (2011) traces through film a trajectory of public support for the Bush administration and the War on Terror, from a high immediately after September 11, to a period of uncertainty, to increasing resistance. Kellner (2010) contends that a movie’s politics could be liberal, conservative, radical, layered, or “incoherent” and that “contemporary Hollywood cinema can be read as

a contest of representations and a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcends the political discourses of the era” (2). For example, Nair’s (2013) study of the film *Spider-Man* points to how, as early as 2002, the pervasive phenomenon of falling bodies registered mainstream cinema’s grappling with the non-heroic component horrors of September 11. Additionally, Pollard (2011) writes, “post-9/11 noir emphasizes emotionally flawed, depressed protagonists trapped in threatening, potentially deadly situations, dark settings, and social dislocations.” He adds, “The post-9/11 genre exudes violence, cynicism, and paranoia about disturbing, violent events, often including various forms of terrorism” (4). Ultimately, he argues, this wave of movies “reveals an increasing ambivalence about traditional concepts of good and evil” (183). Kellner (2010) characterizes movies as “an especially illuminating social indicator of the realities of a historical era, as a tremendous amount of capital is invested in researching, producing, and marketing the product. Film creators tap into the events, fears, fantasies, and hopes of an era and give cinematic expression to social experiences and realities.” (4). Such persistently revisited tropes point to a troubling psychic disruption among viewers, for whom such portrayals are sufficiently relevant that they spend time and money watching them as entertainment, even when they offer neither clear nor easy resolution to the dilemmas pressing on them from the world beyond the fiction.

Moreover, like the oral history accounts, DeLillo’s writings, and the television shows explored earlier, *The Dark Knight* (2008) situates its crises in relationship to a particular originating event whose component features reverberate horror and helplessness throughout the story. Resonances with September 11 permeate *The Dark Knight* from the start. The film begins outside of time and place with a frame-consuming, slow-motion, blue-tinted and melancholy chiaroscuro of dense, roiling fireballs. We have seen this before, in the telltale flames bursting from the sides of office towers confirming the impact of passenger planes. We could not see what we knew they obliterated: the whole bodies of human lives, vanishing in an unexpected instant. Even in that day’s replayed video coverage, the planes perhaps travel too inconceivably for our minds to register what they are doing as they are doing it, with disbelief and fear inciting our mental resistance as they seem to, but surely could not, be heading for a collision with occupied skyscrapers. But the fireballs mark the undeniable and irreversible moments from which the post-September 11 world starts to unfold. They form the threshold between what possibly could have been

averted and what can now never be undone. In *The Dark Knight*, balls of flame, accompanied by a faint, asynchronous, apprehensive undertone of a sustained note, introduce the subsequent action. Rather than disappearing through a straightforward fade-out or dissolve, the flames seem to push toward viewers, displaced in the montage by a dark void at the center of the frame as it expands into the familiar Bat Symbol, the gloomy emblem of a haunted hero flying forward and looming larger until viewers see only black (*The Dark Knight* 2008). It is a bleak beginning with its oblique reference to a September 11 context of foregone doom and foreclosed hope, with the fireballs having suspended us within the instance of awareness that sometimes we have fear and few, if any, options.

Yet such references become increasingly more direct. The film jump-cuts from the almost ethereal hushed blaze to an IMAX—and in appropriately equipped theaters, an engulfing—aerial shot steadily zooming in on the upper floors of one among a cluster of skyscrapers in a dense cityscape. As the continuous undertone crescendos—now clearly audible and supplemented by brisk percussive beats that intensify anticipatory tension, as well as distant street noises that ground events in their contemporary urban setting—the building fills the frame, its windows reflecting the city skyline until one of them explodes outward. Indoors, from the opening of the blown window, two men soon launch and secure a cable to another building. The camera, situated behind the men as each latches onto the cable, pursues them with a swift tracking shot as they jump into the air to glide toward the neighboring rooftop. However, at the ledge, instead of following the men as they slide forward along the cable, the shot abruptly becomes a tilt down to show the street traffic several stories below, creating a point of view that enables viewers to feel as though they have followed the men out the window and into their own freefall. These images are also not new; we have seen people clustered at blown-open office windows and some jumping out of them. Yet there is one difference: the IMAX filming and the camera's positioning draw viewers into a perspective they did not have on September 11, one located within the building that drives outward into a stomach-sinking plunge (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Associations can be made between what we have seen on the news and what we see in the theater, with the act of witnessing in the theater intensified through the IMAX effect of immersing its viewers in the staged action. We have been invited to experience ourselves as more than just passive observers, who can watch from afar without connection or consequence.⁷ With this invitation, the film occasions for viewers the

opportunity to recognize within the September 11-related predicaments it dramatizes our own susceptibilities, complicities, and responsibilities.

Details throughout the film promote further correlations between Gotham, New York City, and September 11.⁸ When The Joker is guarded in jail by a veteran cop, he taunts the officer, “How many of your friends have I killed?” The question chills, coming from someone other characters have termed a “terrorist” (*The Dark Knight* 2008). In the aftermath of September 11, the staggeringly high casualties to close-knit communities like the New York City police and fire departments were evident in the hardships of survivors who lost multiple colleagues and friends in a single morning, who afterward would attend an almost endless progression of funerals and memorial services. Indeed, the police commissioner’s funeral, set in Gotham but filmed near Ground Zero in Manhattan (Tyree 2009, 32)—while other city scenes were filmed in Hong Kong, Chicago, and London (*The Dark Knight* Production Notes)—features marching rows of solemn uniformed officers to the mournful sounds of bagpipes as a somber echo of real-life commemorations. Later, during the car chase among The Joker, an armored police van transporting Dent, and Batman, a burning fire engine blocks the van’s route, detouring them to more dangerous streets (*The Dark Knight* 2008). The now-recognizable image, a fire truck crushed and ablaze, poses a warning far exceeding in its portentous overtones any significations independent of September 11 (Tyree 2009, 32). Additionally, when Batman returns to the site where Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal) was killed, he hangs his head in the foreground of a smoldering pile of debris, with firefighters in the background sending arcs of water over collapsed steel beams, a scene evocative of Ground Zero (Tyree 2009, 32). Moreover, Gotham is overtly connected to Manhattan when The Joker addresses the “bridge-and-tunnel crowd,” a reference to those who commute to the island from the city’s other boroughs and New Jersey (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Indeed, when Gordon must call the National Guard to assist throngs of people gathering at the water for ferries toward safety, memories of the unprecedented “like a movie” evacuation of Lower Manhattan might surface. Such allusions, integrated seamlessly throughout the narrative, create a context for the story that couches interpretative possibilities for the film’s staged exigencies in terms of a particular exigency, September 11, in viewers’ own recent past.

Similarly, throughout *The Dark Knight*, interiors feature floor-to-ceiling windows, reminiscent of the World Trade Center’s design, which permit the uninterrupted presence of Gotham. These settings foster

suggestively porous boundaries between a city’s interiors and exteriors, which September 11 frighteningly showcased when planes rent open enclosed spaces, around which office workers crowded for air and relief. Notably, when Batman pushes The Joker over the ledge of a construction site, he uses a grappling hook to retrieve the villain (adhering to his rule never to kill) and suspend him in mid-air upside down, a precarious position from which The Joker reveals his anticipated victory in spite of his capture and his ferry plan’s failure. He explains, “I took Gotham’s white knight. And I brought him down to our level. It wasn’t hard—see, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push” (*The Dark Knight* 2008).⁹ His characterization of Dent’s devastation as a downfall while he himself hangs in the air facing downward (although the camera vertically rotates, ultimately positioning viewers with him in head-first suspended freefall) eerily summons and preserves the moments of descent of those who jumped from the World Trade Center, moments frozen in time by, among other records, the “Falling Man” photograph by AP photographer Richard Drew. They were fearful moments to witness, embodying our shared ultimate vulnerability in their evidence of utter despair and powerlessness and in their prelude to a horrific end. And The Joker has put his finger precisely on this shared vulnerability: that madness, like gravity, takes only the right push. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams’ (1997) concept of “structure of feeling” signals specificities in the variables of shared experience (128–135). *The Dark Knight*’s historical associations with the context of September 11 evoke a structure of feeling of contemporary angst as the film’s conundrums unfold before viewers immersed in their own lived experiences of perceived threats and moral uncertainties.

EXPECTATIONS, OBLIGATIONS, AND RISKS: THE CITY AT THE CENTER OF THE FIGHT

Insinuations of causal connections between Gotham’s populace and the city’s perpetual troubles in the context of these historical associations afford viewers the opportunity to reflect on their own relationships to September 11 and its aftermath. In the film’s middle pivot (unrelenting, staccato-paced action disrupts any sense of a narrative arc), Gotham’s brash, idealistic District Attorney Harvey Dent reluctantly presides over a press conference he has convened at Batman’s insistence. In front of a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd, he stands behind a microphone-packed podium situated in the corner of a room with wall-to-wall windows expos-

ing the city outside, a setting that figuratively suggests through framing his cornering by Gotham's norms. The Joker has been fulfilling his promise to kill Gothamites until Batman reveals his secret identity, and the masked crime fighter has decided to meet this demand to attempt to forestall the further murder of innocents. Dent, angered by what he perceives as "giving in," proceeds with the media event but tries to use the opportunity to boost public morale and enlist the city's support in resisting The Joker's ultimatum. However, a reporter (Sophia Hinshelwood) characterizes Dent's reluctance to expose Batman as protecting "an outlaw vigilante" over "citizens," with which the crowd agrees. Soon after, a heckler (Keith Kupferer) yells that because of Batman, "Things are worse than ever." After Dent pleads for calmer reflection about the fate of Batman and of Gotham, a police officer (Joseph Luis Caballero) shouts, "No more dead cops," an invocation of legitimated authority, supposedly endangered by Batman, which fully divests Dent of any power to win over the assembly on his behalf (*The Dark Knight* 2008). These voices for Gotham have clearly deemed Batman the root cause of, and certainly not the solution to, the city's worsening violence, demarcating the public as hapless sufferers and Batman as irresponsible adventurer.¹⁰ Given this characterization of Gothamites as blameless victims uninvolved in the crises that threaten them, Dent can expect little participation from them in their city's salvation; corrective action, like the threats it strives to counteract, seemingly must occur without them. This detaching of accountability for corrective action from those for whom it is purportedly taken not only limits Dent's options but also, given the film's allusions to September 11 and its aftermath, poses real-world challenges as well.

However, Dent's comments in this scene make clear, as he tries to dissuade public opinion from pushing the Batman into The Joker's hands, that Batman's behavior does not occur in a vacuum of reckless self-indulgence, and The Joker's cunning does not occur in a void of freewheeling aggression, from which Gotham can free itself by scapegoating someone already risking himself on their behalf. After all, as he points out, Batman's activities are not the proximate reason for the public's turn against him. He says, "We're doing it because we're scared. We've been happy to let the Batman clean up our streets for us until now." Indeed, earlier in the film, over dinner with Wayne, Dent, and their (not fully known to Dent) shared love interest Rachel Dawes, Wayne's date Natascha (Beatrice Rosen) refers to Gotham as "the kind of city that idolizes a masked vigilante," to which Dent responds, "Gotham City is proud of an ordinary citizen standing

up for what's right." At this point, it would seem from their comments that the average man and woman have welcomed Batman's arrival. Yet Natascha counters, "Gotham needs heroes like you—elected officials, not a man who thinks he's above the law," with which Wayne concurs, asking, "Who appointed the Batman?" Dent's answer, "We did. All of us who stood by and let scum take control of our city," catches Wayne's attention (*The Dark Knight* 2008). For him, a new prospect unfolds: the possibility that Gotham could render Batman obsolete by accepting some answerability for—and accordingly, some risk to—itself rather than allowing a shadowy figure to shoulder the entire burden of rescuing a community gone awry. Dent's perspective fosters an alternative vision, one that encourages citizens to recognize their own responsibility for their community's well-being.¹¹ In this view, effective citizenship involves actively cultivating democratic principles throughout daily public life, rather than just through an occasional vote. Such a view raises useful questions about the contours and implications of explicit consent, implicit acquiescence, hesitant resistance, and firm opposition in a post-September 11 environment of hard choices, a disconcerted populace, and a federal government willing to act audaciously.

Indeed, the urgency for Gothamites to accept some accountability and participate more fully and directly in their own governance becomes progressively clearer throughout the film. After all, while Gotham is not a perfect city, neither are its most devoted caretakers. The violent and disturbed Batman works closely with Lieutenant Gordon, the solitary man of integrity embedded in a crooked police force, and eventually with District Attorney Dent, a fresh-faced, charismatic, but cocky legal crusader whose reservations about police corruption put him at odds with Gordon about how to handle the police department. When they first meet, Gordon warns Dent, "In this town, the fewer people know something, the safer the operation," evidencing a customary, general wariness about who can be trusted around him. But Dent tells Gordon pointedly, "I don't like that you've got your own special unit, and I don't like that it's full of cops I investigated at internal affairs," placing the dishonesty within intimate range of Gordon's daily work. Gordon replies, "If I didn't work with cops you'd investigated while you were making your name at I.A., I'd be working alone. I don't get political points for being an idealist. I have to do the best I can with what I have" (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Gordon's comments duck the possibility Dent has raised of his reliance on bad cops by characterizing Dent's interest in

his closest colleagues as mere political gamesmanship, on the one hand glossing over possible wrongdoing he himself might have overlooked and on the other hand construing Dent as an opportunist. At the same time, though, these comments indicate Gordon's sense of vulnerability as the lone law enforcer with an unadulterated commitment to justice. He indirectly admits some truth to Dent's suspicions by suggesting that his isolation in virtue requires him to compromise in his actions; if he did not attempt to enforce the law with the help of those less committed, he would likely achieve no justice at all. From Gordon's experience, the luxury of idealism, of finding for the problems at hand faultless means toward perfect solutions—actions that lead to desired, foreseeable, wieldy outcomes—has no place in Gotham.¹² Lacking Batman's super-heroic skills, his reaction, like everyone else's in Gotham, must remain more mundane and therefore less readily disentangled from the inertial city's ethical mire.

Through most of the film, Gotham's principled yet pragmatic district attorney presents an alternative to Batman's freelance crime fighting: an aboveboard, legally sanctioned, and therefore legitimate approach to the city's rehabilitation. Similarly lacking superhero capabilities, Dent nevertheless behaves with a bold abandon evidencing full confidence in his public, firm battle against crime, earning him the nickname "Gotham's White Knight," a critical comparison to Batman considering the film's title. Such courage is remarkable in a criminal justice system known for its risks and compromises, but his valor borders on swagger. At critical junctures, he flips a coin to choose his course of action, claiming every time that he actually makes his own luck. The coin is rigged, with a head on each side, corroborating his claim that he neither believes in nor succumbs to chance. However, when Dent and Rachel are kidnapped by corrupt cops and hidden in separate parts of the city, they are each bound to explosives with timers and provided with speakerphone access to one another. As a result, when Batman reaches Dent just in time, they both hear Rachel die without being able to do anything to stop it. For Batman, this is understandably excruciating; he has known and loved Rachel for most of their lives. However, this mortal helplessness, the kind that first propelled Wayne's development into Batman, devastates Dent. Having suffered burns on half of his face when his own building exploded, Dent's very features now manifest his own post-trauma adoption of a new persona, a "Two-Face," someone who eschews ideals and determines murderous action according to the toss of an unpredictable coin (*The Dark Knight* 2008).

Although Dent first targets those directly culpable for his maiming and Rachel's death—their abductors Detectives Wuertz (Ron Dean) and Ramirez (Monique Gabriela Curnen) and the mafia don Maroni (Eric Roberts), whom The Joker terms the plan's organizer—he especially targets his former ally Gordon, whom he considers ultimately responsible. Dent had doubted the advisability of keeping the gangsters' money launderer Lau (Chin Han) in custody at the Major Crimes Unit (MCU), but Gordon had insisted, regarding the county jail alternative as even less secure. Yet The Joker later takes Lau with him when he himself escapes MCU, proving Gordon wrong and undercutting their single grand victory against crime since only Lau's testimony could have enabled convictions against his associates. Most importantly, when Dent had first warned Gordon about Wuertz and Ramirez, Gordon refused to believe they had links to Maroni, instead blaming the district attorney's office for leaking information (*The Dark Knight* 2008). But Gordon's good-faith intentions coupled with an inability (or refusal, according to Dent) to operate independently of Gotham's flawed legal order lead to dire results for his friends.

Dent is determined to force Gordon to confront intimately the horror his mistakes have permitted. Dent kidnaps Gordon's wife (Melinda McGraw) and two young children (Nathan Gamble and Hannah Gunn) and holds them hostage on the site of Rachel's murder, ready to use his family to punish him. The punishment crystallizes into a single concept, one not unfamiliar to those who recall from September 11 how those trapped on the hijacked planes and in the World Trade Center towers had connected to loved ones through last phone conversations and messages. Dent had first alluded to this particular pain when he found Maroni, referring to the mobster's wife when he asked, “Can you imagine what it would be like to listen to her die?” When he faces Gordon, he elaborates, “Have you ever had to talk to the person you love most, wondering if you're about to listen to them die? You ever had to lie to that person? Tell them it's going to be all right when you know it's not? Well, you're about to find out what that feels like. Then you'll be able to look me in the eye and tell me you're sorry” (*The Dark Knight* 2008). For Dent, being present to a loved one's last moments without being able to alter them constitutes a catalyzing harm, an experience of utter helplessness that marks the pivot on which he turns from aggressive but earnest law enforcer to reckless and amoral avenger. His transformation, embodied in the grotesque exposure of bone and muscle on half of his face, crystallizes physically the unsightly

variations of “gloves-off” retribution that offered to those disconcerted by the tragedies of September 11 the dubious comfort of a deceptively facile forceful response.

Of course, since this is a superhero fiction, Batman intervenes. At this critical moment when the incorruptible vigilante comes face-to-face with the now-corrupted civil servant, Dent accuses his former counterpart of advocating what he once also believed but now regards as insidious folly, that “we could be decent men in an indecent time.” Gotham’s cycle of violence afforded abundant occasions for compromised values in return for questionable gains in safety and stability, occasions The Joker exploited by manufacturing lose-lose scenarios that showcased to what acts of desperate brutality the most fearful and vulnerable might succumb. By the end of the film, it is a toss-up indeed between virtue and infamy, between the White Knight’s fatal disillusionment with the rules of law and the Dark Knight’s survival in the shadows of an improvised moral code. When Dent articulates his newfound belief in the dominance of chance, especially as the cause of Rachel’s death, Batman corrects him, “What happened to Rachel wasn’t chance. We decided to act. We three. We knew the risks and we acted as one. We are all responsible for the consequences.” Here Batman voices the dilemma that has plagued his own efforts throughout the film, that even necessary actions can produce unwanted outcomes, for which the actor nevertheless remains responsible. With Dent holding a gun to the head of Gordon’s son, Batman adds, “you’re fooling yourself if you think you’re letting chance decide. You’re the one pointing the gun, Harvey.” His admonition underscores his own realization that the impact of chance does not provide an excuse from personal accountability. In the end, the standoff comes to a bleak resolution: Gordon and his family are spared, but Dent is killed and, given his crime spree, potentially disgraced. Both Batman and Gordon realize that, should the public become aware of his escapades as Two-Face, Dent’s work as an inspiring and effective district attorney will unravel, as will Gotham’s hope for real and lasting change. Consequently, the film ends with Batman taking the blame for Two-Face’s misdeeds, preferring a fiction that rouses a city to the possibility of good to the disheartening truth of fallible heroes operating within an imperfect world (*The Dark Knight* 2008). The city must be saved from itself.

Given such scenes, The Joker’s and the Batman’s antics seem to occur in the conditions of a community whose long-term welfare and principles yield to the short-term demands of exigency and expediency. Accordingly, plot

developments depend on how expectedly the general public responds to The Joker’s exploitation of a guiding dynamic to Gotham’s social structure: the belief that dirty work is necessary and that somebody else should be doing it. Such a belief forms the core enticement for The Joker’s manipulations, a chance to test investments in individual interest, the common good, and the social order. Such a belief rings familiar in a post-September 11 world, in which viewers themselves have wondered what is necessary and what is right, what threatens them and how they can respond, in the aftermath of a calamity that has showcased the high stakes of these very questions.

ESCALATION, OR THE ART OF PICKING A FIGHT

Recognizing these contradictions in Gotham’s mores and reveling in their fecundity for engineering mayhem, The Joker excels at tailoring interventions that maximize dissension and hopelessness and expose the delicate perforations separating the upstanding from the prone. Connections of every well-intentioned crime-fighting effort to disastrous, unintended consequences drive the plot, causing Gordon’s anxiety about escalation as voiced in *Batman Begins* to proliferate among its sequel’s characters. Batman’s intense vigilance practically incapacitates conventional gangsters, convincing them that drastic measures require drastic resistance. As a result, they hire a literal and figurative stranger, The Joker, to kill the Batman. A wild card—unpredictable, of obscure origins, prone to cruel pranking, and fond of using playing cards as cryptic dispatches—The Joker immediately follows his own skewed interests, outstripping his co-conspirators’ control and expectations for contained action and eluding rationalizing behavioral explanations. His delight in fomenting chaos, disrupting business as usual among Gotham’s law offenders and enforcers, is unexplained in terms of either benefit or back-story.¹³ He embodies an extremity that the gangsters, the police department, and the people of Gotham—but not Batman—lack. In fact, the gangsters’ turn to an extreme response out of frustration with a threatening climate mirrors Batman’s own development, albeit in an opposite direction. In effect, The Joker counterbalances the Batman, a lone, mysterious actor committed to doing wrong as forcefully as Batman has committed to doing right (*The Dark Knight* 2008). As a result, The Joker and others come to see the two as important, if not necessary, to one another’s evolution in actions and purposes (Reynolds 1992, 67–68, 103; Kaveney 2008, 109–110), leaving bystanders, innocent and guilty alike, caught in the crossfire.

Repeatedly, this engagement manifests in his fabrication of no-win scenarios that test others' resourcefulness and resolve. When Dent and Rachel disappear immediately after The Joker's arrest, Batman grills him for their whereabouts in a monitored police interrogation room. The Joker goads Batman doggedly, relishing and fueling the anger that drives Batman further along the fine line of torture as he slams the prisoner into a table, the wall, and the two-way mirror, then delivers successive blows to the face. In the end, these assaults prove gratuitous, since The Joker wants to reveal the captives' locations. "That's the point," he explains, "You'll have to choose." He has told Batman, "Killing is making a choice...you choose between one life or the other. Your friend, the district attorney, or his blushing bride-to-be" (*The Dark Knight* 2008). With Dent and Rachel in distant parts of the city, Batman can rescue only one of them, knowing that the police, who cannot move as decisively, will likely fail to save the other. Hence, The Joker's taunt that "killing is making a choice": Batman must choose at all in order to save at least one of them, but by choosing to save one, he by default has "chosen" to kill the other. Christopher Nolan has characterized this interrogation scene as crucial (Boucher October 28, 2008b). After all, the quandary it dramatizes, that even formidable power can be hamstrung and sabotaged and choice can sometimes lead only and inevitably to problematic outcomes, permeates the entire film. The Joker tells Batman, "You have nothing, nothing to threaten me with. Nothing to do with all your strength," savoring how well his design to incapacitate the dominant has worked (*The Dark Knight* 2008). In The Joker's terms, even as Batman uses all of his strength, he can accomplish nothing, and in fact it is specifically *by* using all of his strength that Batman generates futile results. The ability of a determined few to expose the powerful as vulnerable, and therefore to incite ever more desperate reactions, resonates with other references to the film's September 11 context.

Interestingly, then, both Dent and Wayne's butler Alfred (Michael Caine) expressly call The Joker a "terrorist," an attribution unique among cinematic incarnations of the oft-nicknamed character. Is he? He introduced his first demands for Batman's unmasking via the broadcast of a tortured, eventually murdered, copycat vigilante (Andy Luther) whose dead body he hung outside the mayor's (Nestor Carbonell) office window. He holds a city hostage by fulfilling his promise to kill until Batman surrenders, starting with a judge and the police commissioner, as well as with unsuccessful attempts on the district attorney's and the mayor's lives. He blows up a hospital when the general public fails to fulfill his request

that they assassinate a lawyer (Joshua Harto) who knows Batman’s identity (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Although formally defining “terrorism” launches a loaded task far too exhaustive for this particular chapter,¹⁴ for most people’s comfort levels, perhaps he fits the bill insofar as he targets the unsuspecting and unarmed so fear can amplify his efforts to tilt power relations in his favor.¹⁵

But if so, what kind of a terrorist is he? Defining terrorism frequently stalls at the point when one person’s “terrorist” is another’s “insurgent,” “rebel,” or even government (Banks et al. 2008, 5–9). In cases of insurgency and rebellion, the reasoning goes, on a playing field where the motives and means of the dominant players are suspect, why should the rogue contestant be singled out for reprobation (5–6)? In this sense, corrupt Gotham City could represent the kind of failed system that needs replacing, and the extremity of its opposition is the measure of its failure. Yet this approach presumes actors with political aims: even if some such actors use reprehensible methods to achieve their ends, ends still matter, actions are undertaken toward the achievement of *something*. On these terms, there is a certain logic to these actors’ deeds, according to which meaningful outcomes can be imagined and effective interventions can be calibrated (8–9). On these terms, an interested public can sense some kind of stable foundation for whatever policies they endorse or reject.

However, some have contended in real-world debates over terrorism that for certain groups, there is no end in sight, neither legitimate purpose nor feasible cessation (Juergensmeyer 2003, 148–166). Indeed, regardless of what we might infer about possible motivations given US political and economic involvements overseas, no messages and no demands accompanied the suicide plane crashes on September 11 taking thousands of lives. At the time, there were no strings attached. The event occurred as an end in itself, massive destruction as self-sufficient spectacle, rather than as overt advancement of a specific cause or interest. In such cases, the argument goes, modes and drives lie outside reason, refusing negotiation and confounding ordinary forms of counteraction (Juergensmeyer 2003, 148–166). If so, all the old rules of engagement, principles that might be effective and justifiable against, say, criminals or combatants with decipherable operating principles of their own, would seem no longer to apply. In their absence loom alternatives with burgeoning and disquieting practical and moral implications (Stern 2003, 288–296). Under such circumstances, for those interested in a way forward that offers both peace and justice, no clear and easy path readily presents itself. As The Joker

would say, “Nothing to do with all your strength” (*The Dark Knight* 2008). In this sense, The Joker surpasses the threat that any individual terrorist might pose, which can be delimited within calculable estimations of goals, damage, and containment. Instead, he embodies the kind of peril terrorism writ large poses, which menaces a perpetual state of untold danger undermining the premises of any functional community by propagating profligate and exploitable uncertainties and fears, the kinds of uncertainties and fears that can amplify distrust and soften receptivity to extreme responses.

At first, though, Bruce Wayne regards The Joker as no different from the gangsters driven by greed whom he battles nightly in the guise of Batman. As he tells his butler Alfred, “Criminals aren’t complicated.... We just need to figure out what he’s after.” In his experience, it is a straightforward matter: once you know what an adversary wants—and they all want something—counter them at that point. But Alfred considers The Joker of a different sort altogether. He cautions Wayne, “perhaps this is a man you don’t fully understand.” He explains, “Some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.” Later, The Joker himself effectively corroborates this assessment, telling Dent, “I’m a dog chasing cars. I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it.... I’m not a schemer, I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are” (*The Dark Knight* 2008). His ability to frustrate others’ plans with the intricate strategizing of a chess match belies his denial of scheming. Nevertheless, his intention, to provoke disorder rather than erect an alternative form of order, as might be the goal of an insurgent or rebel, lays bare a thoroughgoing nihilism.

However, in spite of his quip about being “ahead of the curve,” The Joker is not of the *Übermensch*. He is not about mastering human potential as a model to supersede the nihilist condition and regenerate a humanity bogged down by its inauthentic values. The Joker is only about subversion, about instigating an equalizing chaos by exploiting those inauthentic values to expose human potential itself as a fragile fiction. As he announces early in the film, “Whatever doesn’t kill you simply makes you stranger” (*The Dark Knight* 2008). This twist on Nietzsche’s famous proclamation, citing the bizarre rather than empowerment as the outcome of mortal struggle, trumps the nineteenth-century philosopher in its twenty-first-century vision of absolute futility.

Perhaps, then, The Joker stands for something more than just a terrorist, just as—according to Alfred—Batman stands for something more than just a hero, in keeping with the tendency throughout Batman’s fictional life for his exploits to match, if not generate, the enemies he fights (Kaveney 2008, 109–110; Reynolds 1992, 67–68, 103). In this film, when Wayne complains that the Mob has “crossed a line,” Alfred corrects him, “You crossed a line first, sir. You squeezed them, you hammered them to the point of desperation. And in their desperation, they turned to a man they didn’t fully understand.” The Joker himself confirms this dynamic of escalation, telling Batman, “I don’t want to kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off Mob dealers? No...you complete me.” Batman’s successful targeting of more traditional gangsters has upped the ante, his theatric heroics have produced adversaries up to the challenge rather than eliminated opposition altogether (*The Dark Knight* 2008). For this reason, according to this mutually constituting framework within which the notions of “villain” and “hero” become meaningless in isolation, I must also address the nature and responsibilities of the heroism that correlates with Gotham’s villainy.

Wayne had developed his alter ego Batman to combat out-of-control crime, with an anonymous theatricality that could symbolize incorruptibility in a way not possible for a recognizable individual, who could be directly identified with personal interests and susceptibilities. Alfred projects the possibilities of this role when The Joker makes his first demand for Batman’s unmasking; he tells Wayne to resist, explaining, “that’s the point of Batman. He can be the outcast. He can make the choice that no one else can make: the right choice.” Similarly, when Dent’s imposture as Batman maintains Wayne’s anonymity, Alfred tells longtime friend Rachel Dawes, “Batman stands for something more important than the whims of a terrorist...even if everyone hates him for it. That’s the sacrifice he’s making. He’s not being a hero. He’s being something more” (*The Dark Knight* 2008). In this formulation, selfless, good-faith work to serve justice and save others *does* constitute heroism; heroism *is* about doing what is both necessary and right, as illustrated by the fruits of his labors: arrested mobsters, deterred criminals, and district attorneys emboldened to enforce the law. But Alfred asserts that sometimes performing these feats of necessity and right does not *appear* heroic, does not garner the praise, and acclaims that we typically shower over our celebrated heroes. Essentially, being *perceived* as a hero is a little different than doing heroic deeds, because that perception signifies the endorsement of those on

whose behalf the hero is acting. And sometimes those people would rather not be associated with what they nevertheless are asking him—implicitly by their own inaction—to do. In this sense, then, heroics, terrorism, and escalating violence remain incompletely understood without considering the city itself. And so we return, once more, to Gotham.

“GIVING SOMEONE ELSE A CHANCE”: INVOLVING GOTHAM IN THE BATTLE FOR ITS SOUL

Ultimately, The Joker attempts to fully sabotage any remnant of Gotham’s civic virtue. Early in the film, after Batman has had to wade through vigilantes—including some in Batman-like costumes—to finish a fight with drug dealers, Wayne tells Alfred unhappily that the “copycats” are growing in number. “This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I said I wanted to inspire people,” he explains, disappointed that they are the only Gothamites who seem to be contributing at all to their city’s protection.¹⁶ However, The Joker readily understands them as rudimentary but important examples of the evolving potential of Batman’s relationship with Gotham. After all, when The Joker announces his ultimatum to unmask the Batman, he starts by broadcasting his taunting of a now bruised and terrified impersonator and then by hanging the dead man’s body outside the mayor’s office (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Accordingly, The Joker focuses not only on those like Dent and Gordon who directly work with Batman but also on the city dwellers for whom Batman fights and from whom he draws either support or rejection. The Joker recognizes that Batman might seem to work alone, but he does not operate in isolation; Gotham has the power either to enable or to deter his efforts, and he has the power either to embolden or to discourage Gotham’s better inclinations. Yet, until now, rather than act on their own behalf, which would require direct accountability and therefore personal consideration of the possibilities, limits, and ethics of any action, Gotham has permitted someone else, the Batman, to shoulder the burden and worry about the details, thereby never themselves confronting the incompatibilities between what they expect in terms of public safety and what they are willing to avow openly in terms of security measures.

During the interrogation scene between him and Batman, The Joker tells Batman, “They need you right now. But when they don’t, they’ll cast you out like a leper. You see, their morals, their code—it’s a bad

joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble.... I'll show you: when the chips are down, these—these civilized people, they'll eat each other.” He later makes good on this threat by creating a no-win scenario involving two ferries, the Liberty and the Spirit (perhaps the Spirit of Liberty?), whereby one ship carrying prisoners and another carrying assorted others leaving the city are both rigged to explode by midnight, with passengers able to save themselves only if they detonate the other ship. When the free passengers vote to blow up the ship of prisoners, seemingly proving The Joker right, no one actually moves to activate the detonator. So a white, apparently straight (a close-up shot provides a full view of his wedding ring, which tends to signify a legally sanctioned union, and this film predates legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the United States), middle-aged, middle-class businessman (Doug Ballard)—the figure of relative privilege in the Western world—steps up to take the detonator, irritated that “No one wants to get their hands dirty” (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Yet, when he holds it in his hands, he feels the weight of the decision that only direct action can convey. It is one thing to vote for others to kill on your behalf; it is another to become a killer yourself and live your life as such. The Joker has touched on a danger of democracy, the temptation for individuals to vote their own interests at the expense of others. It is this vulnerability that has permitted his escalating antics, halted only when the democratically minded fully value the lives and the interests of others as commensurate with their own.

Critically, on both ships, individuals choose not to kill others in full awareness that such a choice would lead to their own deaths (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Gothamites have, for the first time in the film, accepted the predicament that Batman has shouldered on their behalf, the sometime incompatibility between ideal and action that well-meaning people should perceive as not precluding responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. In this instance, to The Joker's dismay, they opt for self-sacrifice over self-preservation, finally putting a brake to the violence that has continued to escalate when no one else had been willing to take such a stand. Their decision halts The Joker's devastating run as effectively as Batman's coincident hand-to-hand combat with the villain. The passengers and Batman prove mutually indispensable to one another, with the passengers' intervention in their own fates offering mundane, risky, but recognizable hope for stable civic virtue rather than a further call for the kinds of extraordinary measures that tend to lead to uncontainable

outcomes. Although, in the end, the ships do not explode since Batman successfully defeats The Joker before he can trigger the explosives, the decisions on the ferries are made in ignorance of any way out. As a result, they serve as an unenviable but powerful model of the modes, the stakes, and the negotiations of living as a free—that is, safe, autonomous, and responsible—individual.¹⁷

In this context, allusions to the War on Terror, the historical but not inevitable consequence of September 11, resonate as real-world parallels to the film's staged no-win situations. Batman's abduction of Lau from Hong Kong to Gotham to deliver him to law enforcement invokes the notion of extraordinary rendition, with Batman circumventing laws the police cannot. Moreover, Lau's use as the center of a RICO case against the city's mobsters calls to mind the legal means that might successfully combat ordinary crime, but perhaps falter when targeting adversaries with more complex motives, means, and resources. Similarly, Batman's construction of a city-wide surveillance system, which he enlists Lucius Fox's (Morgan Freeman) help to operate to locate The Joker, immediately appalls Fox, who sees the system as "unethical...dangerous...wrong." However, in this case, its one-time-only deployment, since Batman arranges its implosion once The Joker is captured, evades any resolution of ethical dilemmas. At the same time, the video-taped torture and killing of the vigilante Batman impersonator reminds us of similar images of ill-fated security contractors in Iraq, while The Joker's cell-phone activation of a bomb, a kind of improvised explosive device (IED), likewise draws on once-alien tactics and concepts that have become, only through the War on Terror's progression, commonplace. In the concluding scenes, when both Batman and police SWAT teams seek to rescue hostages at a construction site, only Batman realizes quickly that the victims have been disguised as their victimizers and vice versa. The ensuing tangle, with Batman trying to free the real hostages, unmask and defeat the real hostage-takers, and prevent the SWAT teams from accidentally killing the innocent, instantiates the troubles contemporary, especially non-conventional, conflict causes when distinctions between civilians and non-combatants cannot be clarified (*The Dark Knight* 2008). In each instance, the film evokes the terrain of contemporary dilemmas that, in their action-film setting, duck direct commentary on real-world solutions.¹⁸ Instead, these performances of viewers' current landscape's pressures and constraints occasion our consideration of how to weigh and reconcile our own risks and duties in a post-September 11 world.

CONCLUSION: THE DARK (K)NIGHT OF THE SEPTEMBER 11 WORLD

This chapter provided a close reading of the Batman legacy and its adaptation in *The Dark Knight* to address September 11-related cultural fractures around notions of meaningful and ethical choice. Rooted in anxieties provoked by that morning's horrors, I have shown here how this film documents and involves its viewers in confronting the culturally traumatic persistence of doubts about the possibility of effectively balancing public and personal safety with justice and civil rights. One of the film's most evocative moments in summoning these doubts occurs in the scene of Dent's press conference. In his attempt to foster hope among frightened and disillusioned Gothamites and rally them to resist The Joker in a city where, they protest, "things are worse than ever," Dent tells his audience, "the night is darkest just before the dawn. And I promise you, the dawn is coming" (*The Dark Knight* 2008). The sixteenth-century Spanish, Roman Catholic Saint John of the Cross (2002) originated the term "the dark night of the soul" to characterize the fraught paradox afflicting the most committed of spiritual devotees: the closer they get to God, the more they feel his absence. This conception emerged in contemporary headlines with the revelation of Mother Teresa's decades-long crisis of faith, during which she performed world-celebrated acts of social service in the name of Jesus, all the while suffering secretly from an acute sense of his abandonment (Van Biema 2007). According to John of the Cross and contemporary theologians, this dark night signals the sacred process by which God's love purifies souls and draws them to him, an encounter between divine infinity and human finitude of such overwhelming disproportion that the unfathomable connection is experienced as a lack. For those in the throes of such an ordeal, perseverance in benevolent action evidences the faith they doubt within themselves. According to skeptics, however, the experience of lack is, quite simply, only that: a realization that in fact nothing does lie beyond the material world to defend the belief in something more (Van Biema 2007). Either way, the dark night of the soul marks a turning point for those who operate on the edges of human possibility. After all, who but the exceptional will stake their very souls on doing the right thing, even when doing that right thing offers no reward, neither material nor spiritual benefit, and especially at times when "the right thing" itself seems too precarious a concept to justify obligation?

In its immediate aftermath, September 11 was perceived as a social purgation, with the day's horror and its aftermath's uncertainties suddenly (and ultimately only temporarily) rendering obsolete arbitrary preoccupations, such as the preceding summer's media obsession with shark attacks and Congressman Gary Condit's illicit and, as ceaselessly surmised but later disproved, possibly criminal relationship with the missing Chandra Levy (Rutenberg 2002). Yet as the aftermath continued to unfold, attention to serious concerns ended up raising more questions than answers, with controversial War on Terror measures at sites like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay perceived as belying any notion of the United States as a nation that holds itself to a higher standard. The dark night of the September 11 world has been one in which threats showcased by the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon persist, but also one in which both effective and just response have seemed to many at best elusive, at worst impossible. What we can do and what we should do have seemed to pose often incompatible options, obscuring the substance of perseverance through action in lieu of belief that sustains those who muscle through more traditionally spiritual crises.

In *The Dark Knight* (2008), The Joker capitalizes on such a crisis of faith, his villainy manifesting in opportunistic leveraging of desperate moments. In *Batman Begins* (2005), the film that launched Nolan's Batman narrative, Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes) tells her long-time friend Bruce Wayne, as he struggles as an adult to find the right response to his parents' murders in his childhood, that "it's not who you are underneath, it's what you do that defines you." Her admonishment focalizes Wayne's iterations of his alter ego, Batman, who combats criminals according to a moral code superseding personal interests and prohibiting killing that Wayne believes separates him from common vigilantes. In other words, he commits to the principle that his actions must speak for themselves, and they must speak for a better alternative than the forces he is battling. Even before Rachel's corrective, he articulates this conviction to the mentor, Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson), who has trained him to fight in the name of justice but then requires him to kill an untried prisoner, also in the name of justice. Ducard rebukes, "Your compassion is a weakness your enemies will not share," to which Wayne replies, "That's why it's so important. It separates us from them" (*Batman Begins* 2005). In this way, Wayne demarcates a dividing line, not only between hero and villain but also between hero and vigilante. However tenuous the thread, it is the one he

holds onto. Whether a weakness in fact or a survivors’ sustaining strength, it is a thread of choice as well for those have been wearied and troubled in the wake of September 11.

NOTES

1. Nominated for eight Academy Awards and winner of two, the film has grossed over one billion dollars worldwide, ranking sixth all-time at the domestic box office (Box Office Mojo [2016](#)), indicating a large and appreciative audience.
2. *Batman Begins* is the first film in a trilogy, followed by *The Dark Knight*, and ending with *The Dark Knight Rises*. Although *The Dark Knight Rises* also confronts elements of terrorism, it substantially addresses other contemporary issues as well, such as economic inequality. An adequate discussion of that film’s particular engagement with the United States in the early twenty-first century would be worth more focused, comprehensive study, and therefore is not broached here. However, Fradley ([2013](#)) provides an efficient review of other discussions of Nolan’s three Batman films.
3. For a discussion of revisionism as endemic to superhero comics and indicative of cultural identity and meaning formations, see Wandtke ([2007](#), 5–6).
4. Eisenberg ([2008](#)) also mentions that “British actor Michael Caine [who portrays Alfred in this film] has observed that Superman is how America sees itself and Batman is how the rest of the world sees America.” This quote opens the door to one way of understanding the film’s politics. Nolan himself has characterized his Batman films as “‘an honest assessment or honest exploration of the world we live in—things that worry us’,” and he regards Batman, within popular culture, as “‘the most interesting figure for dealing with the theme of ends justifying the means’” (qtd. in Jensen [2012](#), 34).
5. For a discussion of how comics generally have served as cultural texts, see Kaveney ([2008](#), 267). For a critical, in-depth consideration of how this film resonates with September 11, which shares many of my concerns, see Kerstein ([2008](#)).
6. For a consonant observation regarding the specific psychological dynamics of Wayne’s traumatization, see Reynolds ([1992](#), 67).

7. See Lovell and Sergi (2009) for an analysis of how sensual stimuli viscerally immerse viewers in the not just viewing but more broadly sensing experience of encountering this film.
8. For background on how and why fictional cities in comics have typically stood in for New York City, see Reynolds (1992, 18–19).
9. The Joker's effort to expose the delicate nuances and contingencies separating the virtuous from the malicious, what he has characterized as "one bad day" (Anders 2008, 17–33), is familiar to the world of Batman comics. For a discussion of how The Joker's fascination with corrupting others has driven his behavior in other stories, see Anders (29).
10. For a discussion of similar public ambivalence about Batman in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, see Reynolds (1992, 105).
11. Kaveney notes that in comic books generally, "reliance on superheroes [is n]ever shown as a substitute for collective action" (2008, 20).
12. Earlier, Dent had made the ominous and foreshadowing comment, "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Such a formulation leaves no room for compromise, but it also undercuts idealism. After all, to *not* compromise, you have to be a martyr, which in the context of a film and a contemporary culture struggling with terrorism, could be construed as critiquing absolutist idealism on both sides of the conflict.
13. For a discussion of the evolution in how the comics have dealt with The Joker's background, see Kaveney (2008, 239). For a prescient discussion, preceding the film's release, of how *The Dark Knight* might deal with The Joker's background, see Spanakos (2008, 64). Tyree (2009) regards *The Dark Knight's* handling of the notion of The Joker's back-story as "a fairly pointed mockery of the need for back-stories for villains in the first place, the easy psychoanalysis that reduces every choice to an aftereffect of some early trauma. Actually, it is precisely for this reason that Bruce Wayne, who is controlled at his core by his back-story... is less intriguing than The Joker" (31–32).
14. See Pfefferbaum (2003) for discussion of this issue (176).
15. See Breckenridge and Zimbardo (2007) for a related view (116–118).

16. For a discussion of how Batman comics have registered concern with how his exploits could spur others to circumvent the law, see Spanakos (2008, 58).
17. The civilian response here supports Arendt's (1970) claim that violence and power are absolute opposites, that "the extreme form of power is All against One" (41). She premises her position by contending that although violence provides a strength multiplier (46), its effects are unpredictable, and therefore under violent conditions goals become almost subsidiary to the means taken to secure them (4). Accordingly, she warns, "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (80), leading to the escalation rather than the resolution of conflict. For this reason, power, or the impact of collective "support and consent" (49) rather than of singular aggression, affords more equitable stability.
18. For a discussion of how comic book victories tend to be partial or provisional for the practical reason of needing to preserve continuity, see Reynolds (1992, 81–82) and Kaveney (2008, 140).

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Zero Dark Thirty and the Fantasy of Closure

INTRODUCTION: THE DEATH OF OSAMA BIN LADEN

On the evening of May 1, 2011, almost a full ten years after the September 11 attacks, President Barack Obama confirmed in a televised announcement from the White House's East Room that American forces had found and killed Osama bin Laden. His capture or death had been a national security priority across two decades and three presidents. In his speech, President Obama characterized bin Laden's death as "the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat Al Qaeda." He then said, "But his death does not mark the end of our effort. There's no doubt that Al Qaeda will continue to pursue attacks against us. We must and we will remain vigilant at home and abroad" (Baker et al. 2011). The attacks and the demise of their sponsor book-ended the decade, providing a surprisingly apt structure for narrative closure in real life. But as the president made clear, for him, the Al-Qaeda threat preceded September 11 and would not end with its leader's death. There might be a pause in the action, a catching of breath to take stock of this new information, but the story begun on September 11—at least in terms of foreign policy and national politics—had not, in fact, ended.

Before the official announcement, word of bin Laden's death had been circulating via social media. By the time President Obama spoke, crowds had begun gathering to celebrate, most notably outside the White House, at Ground Zero, and in Times Square. Mostly young adults—those around the White House largely came from nearby George Washington

University and other area schools—their exuberance struck a complicated note, raising questions about the propriety of their joy in marking another human being’s death. But however challenging to consider as an embrace of success, this behavior also signaled a visceral sense of release. Something had happened that compelled many people, such as those in their late teens and early twenties—those who had grown up in full awareness of a changing domestic and geopolitical landscape—to express and share high levels of intense emotion. In spite of the president’s circumspection about meaning and implications, such local receptions of the evening’s news seemed to signal, for some, experience of a kind of denouement.

In December of 2012, Columbia Pictures released *Zero Dark Thirty*, a film directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal depicting the CIA’s efforts to find bin Laden. Like the oral history collections discussed earlier, the film begins its story with the words of those who were at a crash site. Unlike those oral history collections, the words belong not to those who survived but to those who died, recorded via emergency phone communications and voice messages. Like *Falling Man*, the film conjures a world for its characters in which September 11 remains all-consuming and the sense of threat it posed persists over time. Unlike *Falling Man*, the main character, Maya (Jessica Chastain), forcefully retains belief in the possibility of action against this threat and acts accordingly. Like the television shows discussed earlier, protagonists enact problematic forms of heroism. Unlike those television shows, a semblance of resolution in the form of accomplishing a desired outcome—the death of bin Laden—does manifest. And, like *The Dark Knight*, its portrayal of fraught ethical dilemmas when confronting an especially troubling antagonist drew vigorous critical reactions about its ultimate political message, particularly regarding the role of torture in soliciting information about bin Laden’s whereabouts. However, unlike *The Dark Knight* (and the television shows discussed here), the film positions itself as representing actual historical events.¹ Like all of the texts discussed here, the narrative of *Zero Dark Thirty* dwells in a context of event-occasioned exigency and radical unsettlement that complicates and disrupts dominant understandings of an individual’s ability to know about and act ethically in the world under circumstances of the highest stakes.

In sum, *Zero Dark Thirty* echoes the core themes and concerns dominating the other texts explored here, nuanced by its framing and its reception as a faithful representation of real life. Through these resonances, and in spite of its apparent narrative resolution in the death of

bin Laden, the film participates in these other texts' questioning of the notion of closure. The screenplay itself and its ending depended on how real-life events unfolded, performing the ever-contingent nature of any aspiration toward completion within the field of history. Additionally, Maya's pursuit of bin Laden featured the use of incomplete and/or misleading information as well as morally problematic interrogation measures and was situated within explicitly articulated reservations about the criticality of bin Laden's role in Al-Qaeda's evolving modes of operation. This characterization posits the limits of what his death might mean and the ominous possibilities of what the search itself has unleashed and could continue to mean for US identity and national security policies and practices. Following Boal's own terming of the film as "disruptive filmmaking" (qtd. in Breznican 2013), these threads of irresolution occasion for viewers an opportunity to assess for themselves how and why the War on Terror, precipitated by an event characterized by the fear and no-win scenarios that arbitrary victims endured, developed the way that it did; whether its methods were warranted, effective, and/or ethical; and what consequences the conduct of such a war in such ways entails.² Accordingly, rather than portraying a moment of closure, as bin Laden's death seemed to suggest to some on the evening of May 1, 2011, *Zero Dark Thirty* instantiates for viewers and summons their self-reflexive involvement in the open-ended implications attending September 11 and the US responses that followed.³

THE STORY BEGINS: THE PROBLEM EXIGENCY POSES

Philosopher of art Noël Carroll (2007) characterizes narrative closure as the moment at which all questions raised by a story are answered (3–7). The narrative can be understood as a complete whole by virtue of this internal resolution between the problems posed at the beginning of the story and the solutions presented by the end. In this sense—and in keeping with this project's premise of narrative constructing our knowledge of the world—September 11 posed a problem, the elements and contours of which remain engaged by critical political and historical assessment, but in starkest terms (elaborated further throughout this project as well as in this chapter), consists of how to understand and react to a novel threat that caused unforeseen civilian deaths on domestic soil at the hands of a foreign aggressor. *Zero Dark Thirty* starts by presenting the problem in even starker terms, the horror of the last words of dying victims, setting the

parameters for closure within the question not only of how to address this horror but also of what the process of addressing horror itself produces.

Cinema studies theorist Gertrud Koch (1997), writing about the Holocaust, identifies significant moral consequences specifically for narratives that engage historical representation, since they create particular perceptions of an actual event that can shape readers' and viewers' relationships to that event (399). Since readers and viewers re-enter the world and separate from a story at its ending, they carry with them into the world memory of and involvement with that story (399–400). In her reading of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, she distinguishes an ending (*Maus*) whose "interminable" quality leaves a narrative unresolved to keep memory active (404) from an ending (*Schindler's List*) whose redemptive quality puts the past *in* the past (405), concluding both the fictional story and the historical event which it has represented. While both types of ending provide closure for their respective narratives, the first tends to facilitate an awareness of how the past remains active in the present and therefore remains a vital concern for readers and viewers, while the second tends to ask of them only that they honor the past. Keeping Koch's distinctions in mind usefully helps to guide a reading of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s representation of September 11 and its role in both narrative and historical closure.⁴

Zero Dark Thirty (2012) begins with a completely black screen soon accompanied by the sound of voices. The screenplay notes specify, "We hear the actual recorded emergency calls made by World Trade Center office workers to police and fire departments after the planes struck on 9/11, just before the buildings collapsed" (Boal 2011).⁵ Then, a title appears: "September 11, 2001" (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012). The screenplay notes add, "We listen to fragments from a number of these calls...starting with pleas for help, building to a panic, ending with the caller's grim acceptance that help will not arrive, that the situation is hopeless, that they are about to die" (Boal 2011). For the viewer, the predicament of those to whom those voices belong attains a kind of intimacy not readily generated when watching, however often, images of the World Trade Centers' destruction or by hearing fictionalized versions of the same communications. These voices—which is the only sensory input a viewer receives—present mortal vulnerability in a way that could not be perceived, experienced, or understood fully from outside the towers or through the speech of someone only performing the victims' words because the individuals who speak them are immediately encountering and articulating their own, very

real, mortal vulnerability. In this way, the film establishes the exigency that propels its narrative and also, not incidentally, marks the question that September 11 posed in real life: in the wake of the confusion, helplessness, hopelessness, pain, and fear endured by otherwise ordinary office workers about to die arbitrary, unavoidable, and horrific deaths, what will/should happen next? In practical terms, this beginning prepares viewers emotionally to situate the charged context in which the movie's next scenes—the torture of a detainee—occur. In historical terms, this beginning reminds viewers of what originated the psychical intensity that dominated the days and weeks after September 11 during which portentous decisions about how to respond were being made.

“ENHANCED INTERROGATION”

Immediately after bin Laden's death, public conversation turned to analysis of how he was found, including the question of whether or not he was located by way of information generated through the so-called enhanced interrogation of detainees—or, to distill such a bureaucratically euphemistic term into the more charged word focalizing the discourse, through torture. Republican Senator John McCain, himself a prisoner of war for six years in North Vietnam, wrote about “Bin Laden's Death and the Debate over Torture” in *The Washington Post* on May 11, 2011. His opinion piece addressed the principle issues at stake in this controversial component of the War on Terror: is enhanced interrogation torture, is it ever effective, is it ever justifiable, what were its advocates' and practitioners' intentions post-September 11, and was it effective and/or justifiable post-September 11? His answers: some methods characterized as “enhanced interrogation,” such as waterboarding, do constitute torture; torture produces unclear and unreliable mixtures of accurate and inaccurate information since sources speak solely to relieve their suffering, so it is not especially effective; it is never justifiable; its advocates and practitioners post-September 11 “were dedicated to protecting Americans...[and] were determined to keep faith with the victims of terrorism and to prove to our enemies that the United States would pursue justice relentlessly no matter how long it took”; and it was neither effective—again, because the information it produces is unevenly reliable, but also because (as he contended) the specific search for bin Laden did not depend upon leads derived from torture—nor justifiable post-September 11. On a practical level, Senator McCain expressed concern that torturing foreign prisoners puts American

troops at risk for similar treatment, whether now or in future wars, and he found value in the US enacting ideals that distinguish it in world opinion as a model for ethical action. But he also viewed the matter as a “moral debate. It is about who we are.” Uncannily echoing *Batman Begins*, he explains, “Through the violence, chaos and heartache of war, through deprivation and cruelty and loss, we are always Americans, and different, stronger and better than those who would destroy us” (McCain). For Senator McCain, torture has no place in US policy or practice and did not contribute substantively to the search for bin Laden.

However, also immediately after bin Laden’s death, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) informed Congress that the enhanced interrogation program in fact did contribute meaningfully to finding him. The agency had even prepared a public relations plan to ensure that this message was communicated. Yet, in 2014, a US Senate Intelligence Committee report concluded the opposite, that no vital leads had been generated from detainees through these questioning techniques. The CIA pushed back, but ultimately the Senate report has served as the authoritative review of the precise relationship between the enhanced interrogation of detainees and the finding of bin Laden. And so, the years following bin Laden’s death featured fiercely contested positions on the definition, use, effectiveness, and morality of torture among those most accountable for such concerns—the agency that oversaw the interrogation program and the political body that weighed its lawfulness (Savage and Risen 2014; Corn 2014). In this context, Mark Boal and Kathryn Bigelow wrote and filmed *Zero Dark Thirty*, an attempt to condense a decade of the search for bin Laden—a search characterized by secrecy as well as changing politics, priorities, and resources—into a feature-length film that could faithfully summon the War on Terror in all of its contentious and disturbing complexity.

For Bigelow (2013), *Zero Dark Thirty* culminated her years-long desire “to make a modern, rigorous film about counter-terrorism.” She acknowledged the practical difficulties of making such a movie about “one of the most important and classified missions in American history,” which included “too many obstacles, too many secrets, and politicians standing in the way of an easy path.” Controversially, though, rather than stand in the way, the CIA both provided access to material and some editorial suggestions for the screenplay (Child 2013).⁶ In fact, CIA Director Leon Panetta himself provided sensitive operational details, apparently inadvertently, when he spoke at a CIA awards event at the agency’s headquarters

without knowing that Mark Boal was in the audience. Additionally, Bigelow and Boal learned the name of a US Special Operations Forces officer involved in planning the raid on the Abbottabad compound from the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence Michael Vickers (Taylor and Landay 2013). Considering the CIA's public defense of its methods during the War on Terror, its role as a primary source for Bigelow and Boal's understanding of how the search for bin Laden was conducted affords one way to contextualize both the insights and the limitations of the filmmakers' portrayal of the process.⁷

The film's reception seemed to consist—in Bigelow's (2013) own words—of “many thoughtful people...characterizing [the film] in wildly contradictory ways,” a dynamic echoing that of *The Dark Knight*. Before *Zero Dark Thirty* was even released, conservative critics had feared that it would serve as propaganda for President Obama's counterterrorism successes. After viewing it, liberal critics believed the film endorsed the use of torture (Breznican 2013; Muñoz and Herb 2012). The latter concern rendered the film especially controversial. On December 19, 2012, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Dianne Feinstein, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, and Senate Armed Services Committee Ranking Member John McCain wrote Sony Pictures Entertainment's Chairman and CEO Michael Lynton an open letter after viewing a pre-release of *Zero Dark Thirty*. Detailing the elements they regarded as “factually inaccurate,” they decried as irresponsible the film's introductory framing language, “based on first-hand accounts of actual events,” which, when combined with public awareness that the CIA⁸ worked with the filmmakers, could mislead viewers into believing as truth the movie's suggestion that torturing detainees led directly to finding bin Laden. They urged, “You have a social and moral obligation to get the facts right” because “people who see *Zero Dark Thirty* will believe that the events it portrays are facts. The film therefore has the potential to shape American public opinion in a disturbing and misleading manner” (Feinstein et al. 2012). Their fears were not unfounded.⁹ Unlike the utterly fictional narratives I discussed earlier, *Zero Dark Thirty* historicizes real-world occurrences. The film invokes an aura of truth, fact, and authenticity that makes it available for being taken at face value, as a presentation of how past events actually happened for retention in present memory (one version of Koch's narrative closure) rather than as a representation of history as a current subject for analysis and critique (the other version of closure she theorizes).

“DISRUPTIVE FILMMAKING”

According to Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal, they intended to produce a film that achieved the latter—that encouraged viewers to engage critically with the narrative and thereby with the real-life events it depicted. Bigelow explained that she wanted to “immerse the audience in this landscape” (Muñoz and Herb 2012). Since “Torture was...as we all know, employed in the early years of the hunt...it is a part of the story we couldn’t ignore... and we were not interested in portraying this military action as free of moral consequences.” She felt “On a practical and political level, it does seem illogical to me to make a case against torture by ignoring or *denying* the role it played in U.S. counter-terrorism policy and practices.” As she pointed out, “Bin Laden wasn’t defeated by superheroes zooming down from the sky” (Bigelow 2013). From this perspective, sober consideration must be paid to what it means to live in a world of danger, uncertain outcomes, and both ordinary and extraordinary pressures, failings, constraints, and possibilities for the human being without the luxury of a supernatural force relieving us of any material or moral burden. At the same time, though, such sober consideration need not lead to uncritical support for actions conducted under duress; rather, as *The Dark Knight* explores, it could provoke more sustained critical public attention to how a nation’s policies are conducted on behalf of its citizens. Indeed, Bigelow (2013) wondered whether “some of the sentiments already expressed about the film might be more appropriately directed at those who instituted and ordered these U.S. policies, as opposed to a motion picture that brings the story to the screen.” For Bigelow, *Zero Dark Thirty* provided a way to focus a popular audience’s attention on a matter of ongoing—not yet foreclosed—significance and controversy.

For Boal, *Zero Dark Thirty* presented an opportunity to tell a “history-changing story,” in terms of both the importance of the subject of the narrative and the way that presenting the narrative could affect viewers. He has characterized as “disruptive filmmaking” the blending of “current events and creativity to make the news behind the news more accessible, more visceral, more real.” He regards film as uniquely suited for situating viewers’ subjectivity within the story. “And,” he argues, “by giving people a chance to virtually experience these events for themselves, we have a chance to do exactly what the First Amendment creates the space to do: to challenge people to be citizens, to understand and confront the issues of our day” (qtd. in Breznican 2013). According to this vision, filmmakers

present viewers with complex, real-world-based stories that spark ongoing reflection and debate in the real world. In such a scenario, as Boal outlines, well-meaning and mutually respecting viewers can use film as an opportunity to engage in honest and open dialogue about crucial contemporary issues.

Given the attention that *Zero Dark Thirty* received, with impassioned commentary from US Senators as well as more ordinary movie reviewers, Boal's screenplay could be credited with igniting important democratic debate. Indeed, even with much of that discussion attending primarily to whether or not the movie endorses torture, rather than the morality of torture itself, the morality discussion still would of course arise; the popular press produced voluminous coverage of the issue, even if only by way of coverage of the film. Peter Bergen (2012), the journalist who first interviewed Osama bin Laden on television, credited *Zero Dark Thirty* with doing "a valuable public service¹⁰ by raising difficult questions most Hollywood movies shy away from" but also criticized the film for inaccurately tracing a direct line between torture and actionable intelligence on bin Laden. A review in *Humanity and Society* noted the usefulness of using the film not to "illustrate [sic] historical events" but rather to provide a text through which torture and historical representation can be critiqued (Del Rosso 2013, 350). In a review for *The Journal of American History*, Richard Gid Powers (2013) construes the movie as "a conversation, a mature conversation, that both exalts and subverts patriotism, and calls into question its costs...Bin Laden is dead. So what" (305)? For many, ranging from scholars to mainstream journalists and movie critics, the film unproblematically advocates for the effectiveness of torture (Bromwich 2014; Coll 2013; Mayer 2012; Taibbi 2013). For others, it occasions for viewers an opportunity to actively insert themselves into questions about torture's efficacy and ethicality under conditions dominated by urgency and fear—just as they should be inserted since such concerns have mattered in the real world of a War on Terror conducted purportedly on their behalf (Ackerman 2012; Bazelon 2012; Bowden 2013). Denson (2014) argues, "The critics of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s torture scenes, both those liberals who find such scenes withholding moral criticism and those conservatives who find them deficit of the patriotism that in their eyes justifies and perpetuates torture, would have the filmmakers filter, even direct, their audience's views." He adds, "there is no morally neutral entertainment. But there is entertainment that allows the intelligence of the viewer to work out his or her own moral dilemmas concerning how we are to

respond to the scenes streaming before us.” This sample of the array of intense and thoughtful stances articulated within popular press texts on the issue of the film and its relationship to history would seem to evidence the “disruptive filmmaking”—the kind of democratic engagement—that Boal envisioned for *Zero Dark Thirty*.

THE TORTURED...

As noted earlier, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) begins with the voices of those about to die on September 11, 2001. The very next scene features the grim interrogation of high-value detainee Ammar (Reda Kateb). In the film, mirroring real-life detainee Ammar al-Baluchi, he is a nephew of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the so-called architect of the September 11 attacks, and someone who helped send money to one of that day’s hijackers (Rosenberg). Characters throughout the movie tend either explicitly (by sharing a name, which is rare) or implicitly (by sharing a description, role, or situation, which is more typical) to match real-world people. But at times they are also considered composites (such as Maya¹¹), and their circumstances are considered condensations of actual conditions and activities that might have occurred over longer periods of time and/or across multiple individuals. In this case, Ammar’s treatment affords an opportunity for the film to showcase the variety of ways in which the CIA applied interrogation techniques, enhanced or otherwise, while instantiating in rapid screen time the uneven effectiveness of the more forceful methods (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012).

When we first see Ammar, he is under the physical control of CIA interrogator Daniel Stanton (Jason Clarke), who speaks to him with a casual—in fact, flippant—assured authority that implies ownership taken for granted. In fact, Dan’s first words—the first words as the film’s narrative begins—are, “I own you, Ammar. You belong to me.” Dirty, beaten-up, surrounded by masked guards, and imprisoned in some filthy but otherwise non-descript and presumably isolated location, Ammar is, by all appearances, entirely at the mercy of others. Yet his first actions are defiant. In spite of whatever beating he has already taken, and in spite of the beating he receives on-screen, when ordered to look at Dan, he looks down. Soon after, when Dan attempts another round of questioning, Ammar replies, “You beat me when my hands are tied. I won’t talk to you.” Following Dan’s retort, Ammar adds, “You’re a mid-level guy. You’re a garbage man in a corporation. Why should I respect you?” Dan

tries a few more questions, but Ammar repeats, “I told you before I won’t talk to you.” Dan then resorts to an improvised waterboarding, which similarly prompts no information (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012). The screenplay notes concluding the scene summarize it well: “They’ve learned nothing” (Boal 2011).

In the next scene with Ammar a few minutes later, Dan begins with a softer approach, bringing food and drink to set a lighter tone. But while Ammar takes what is offered him, he remains uncooperative when Dan resumes his questioning. As a result, Dan turns to other forms of treatment with which viewers might be familiar from media coverage of US Army conduct at Abu Ghraib: stripping the prisoner of his pants so he is naked in front of a woman, then leading him around in a dog collar. Yet these humiliations also fail to elicit information from Ammar. Instead, when asked the timing of the next planned attack, he obfuscates by mumbling each of the names of the different days of the week. Angry and frustrated, Dan has Ammar shut inside a box too small to allow him to stretch, let alone move (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012). As the screenplay notes affirm, “Once again, he’s learned nothing” (Boal 2011).

The next scene shows an attack on the Khobar Residential Towers in Saudi Arabia, the kind of threat that Dan and his CIA colleagues had anticipated and had been trying to prevent by securing actionable intelligence from Ammar. Dan views this attack as a failure on his part, as well as on Maya’s. But Maya proposes that they spin the predicament. Knowing that Ammar is unaware of current news developments and is sleep-deprived, she suggests that they deceive him into thinking he actually did tell them what they needed to know to stop the attack. Next, outdoors, at a table spread with a variety of appetizing-looking foods, they sit for an amicably toned meal with Ammar, and the deception works. Confused but in no position to get clarity, Ammar seems to accept that he must have let something slip and begins eating and talking more readily with Dan and Maya—and then mentions a name that neither had yet heard: Abu Ahmed. As the film progresses, this lead’s crucial significance becomes increasingly apparent (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012).

One way to interpret this scene in the context of those that preceded it is to say that torture has worked by preparing this detainee to speak. Another way to interpret this scene, though, in that same context, is to say that torture did not work. First, Ammar never volunteered information while forcefully pressured. Second, when he did speak during the first forceful interrogations, he seemed to suggest that he would not speak to

Dan, because of his low status, leaving open the possibility that striking the right relationship sooner with this detainee might have elicited more cooperation. Third, while Maya's strategy depended upon the disorientation generated by Ammar's torture, I wonder whether—had strategy been a clearer component of the process earlier in the film—other, different strategies, not dependent on coercive force, might have produced informative results more quickly. Given Ammar's connections and his forfeiting of critical intelligence during his meal with Dan and Maya, the assumption that he *had* such information in the first place has been rewarded, so one aspect of Ammar's circumstances—the truth of his presumed guilt, so to speak—differs from real-world scenarios in which detainees' presumed guilt is not always proven correct. But otherwise, this series of scenes with Ammar raises in disturbing and complex ways the questions of whether the real-world torture represented is effective or justified, without asserting an unambiguous or unambivalent conclusion—in effect, leaving it for the viewer to assess effectiveness and justification for him or herself. What these scenes showcase much more directly and unflinchingly is the challenge torture poses to any understanding of the dignity of the human person. Ammar, as written by Boal and performed by Kateb, is a three-dimensional character with a personal and political history, intense loyalties, a robust sense of his own individual value, and a sealed fate (Boal 2011; *Zero Dark Thirty* 2012).¹² Watching him treated in ways that disregard this humanity positions the viewer to feel uncomfortable and to explore what that discomfort does or should mean. Again, the film leaves such questions open-ended, never overtly resolving for the viewer how she or he should think or feel about what they are seeing and, by extension, about the kinds of actions undertaken on their behalf during the War on Terror.

...AND THE TORTURERS

Considering the nature and trajectory of the characters conducting the interrogations poses another possible way to determine whether or not the film does take a definitive stance regarding torture and those who administer it. Although other glimpses of detainees recur throughout the film, they primarily occur via video from off-screen black sites that Maya combs for additional clues and insight in her pursuit of bin Laden; they almost never indicate much, if anything at all, about the other interrogators and their specific procedures. Daniel Stanton is the first and only American

interrogator whose identity, personality, and tactics viewers come to know. Both as written by Mark Boal and performed by Jason Clark, Dan is, at the very least, a weird guy. He exudes a down-to-earth frankness and sometimes his swagger seems compelling; in these ways, he is the opposite of what a viewer might imagine a torturer to be—presuming, which is likely, a viewer who lacks expertise about what a torturer in the real world might actually be like. And, as a colleague of the protagonist, Maya, who seems to respect and learn from him,¹³ Dan accrues some credibility for playing his role on the CIA team well. But part of that well-played role on the CIA team consists of being incredibly at ease during and with the interrogations he conducts. The only indication, explicit or implicit, that he has any trouble at all with the work he has been doing manifests when he tells Maya that he has decided to leave his post to begin working in Washington, DC. He explains with a tone of mild complaint, “I’ve just seen too many guys naked. It’s gotta be over a hundred at this point. I need to go do something normal for a while.” In that conversation, he warns Maya, “The politics are changing and you don’t want to be the last one holding a dog collar when the oversight committee comes” (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012). His comments suggest that, rather than regarding his work over the past few years as ethically debatable, he views it simply as a job with accumulating irritations and a function of the mood of the politicians in charge.

Following the July 7, 2005, London attacks, another setback in the War on Terror documented within the film that foregrounds what is at stake as the CIA attempts to thwart Al-Qaeda, Dan catches a quiet moment for himself while eating an ice cream cone and playing with wild monkeys kept in a cage at a CIA facility. His interaction with the monkeys is kind, even intimate—he continues to eat the ice cream after a monkey gets a swipe at it—and he seems genuinely happy with and amused by them, especially after one of them steals his cone, in a way that he has not seemed in any other scene. But this interaction is also slightly peculiar, enough so to help sustain for viewers a distancing from, rather than an identification with, his character. A guard, seeing this, says, “You Agency guys are twisted.” Later, Dan tells Maya, “They killed my monkeys. Something about an escape. Can you fucking believe that” (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012)? The disjuncture between his tenderness for and outrage about the wild monkeys and his utter indifference about the condition of the human beings he interrogates is jarring and, again, not overtly explained. Is he truly indifferent, as his dialogue indicates, about what he has done and those to whom he

has done it? Or is he in the throes of complex psychological coping and defense mechanisms because of what he has done? Who is this person, and has he always been this way, or is this the result of how his part in the War on Terror has changed him?

The trajectory of how Maya's character changes over the course of the film affords an insight into how to answer such questions, at least for her. When she arrives at the CIA facility at the very beginning of the film, she is characterized as young and inexperienced in the field, but a tenacious professional within her scope of expertise. Although Dan expresses concern at first that she might not yet be ready to witness such an intense interrogation in person, she quickly moves past any discomfort she exhibits about Ammar's circumstances. In fact, when Dan suggests they take a break, she replies, "No, we should go back in." In spite of some flinching, hesitancy, and occasional signs of disgust at the conditions of Ammar's confinement, when he turns to her for sympathy and help, she icily responds, "You can help yourself by being truthful." She might be unused to first-hand exposure to these methods of questioning, but she does not reject the approach or even ever doubt that it is valid. In fact, she later employs a similar, albeit less drastic, strategy when speaking to a detainee on her own. Not only does she adopt Dan's verbal tactic with Hassan Ghul, as mentioned earlier, but she also questions another detainee, Faraj (Yoav Levi) with the assistance of a guard who slaps the prisoner whenever Maya feels it is warranted. Although Maya is credited within the film with devising a non-violent interlude of interrogation with Ammar, leading to crucial intelligence, her treatment of Faraj suggests she used other means as well, and she never asserts any qualms about viewing the torture of other detainees or using information secured in that manner. In terms of her character development, she moves from novice to expert within field operations that draw on an array of mundane as well as extraordinary investigatory tools and techniques, and she does so without ever calling into question any of them (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012). In this sense, the viewer has more of an opportunity with Maya than with Dan to determine the origin, nature, and context of her relationship to the detainees, and that relationship is traced, from the start, to be one of mission-driven unconcern about the ethical parameters of the actions she regards as necessary to the fight against terrorism and specific terrorists.¹⁴

As a result, the film could be construed as fully endorsing the protagonist's choices; certainly, the film primarily follows Maya's point of view, who is portrayed as an against-all-odds hero, and thereby encourages

viewers to identify with her and so to support her choices. However, it could also be construed as trying to portray dispassionately the fraught reality of how CIA analysts functioned under the external pressures of periodic terrorist attacks and their own internal pressures to feel personally responsible for preventing such attacks. As the film progresses, one attack after another hits civilian targets—whether the Khobar Towers, London, or the Islamabad Marriott—and with an attempt on Times Square and a suicide bombing on a CIA compound at Camp Chapman, which causes historic casualties for the CIA, the sense of urgency amplifies for those who consider themselves responsible for protecting Americans and the nation's interest.¹⁵ And it is important to note that the film does not question the motives of those involved at the level of implementing controversial measures such as enhanced interrogation. Following the suicide bombing at Camp Chapman, George Wright (Mark Strong), chief of the CIA's Afghanistan Pakistan Department, arrives from Washington, DC, to take the team to task, yelling at a staff meeting, "There's nobody else, hidden away on some other floor. There is just us. And we are failing. We're spending billions of dollars. People are dying. We're still no closer to defeating our enemy." Later, Wright asks the National Security Advisor (Stephen Dillane), "How do you evaluate the risk of *not* doing something, the risk of potentially letting bin Laden slip through your fingers" (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012)? Such passion from a character who could otherwise have been construed as a bland cog in a vast bureaucracy serves to emphasize both exigency and an earnest drive to resolve it. As a film, and a history, that began with the voices of the soon-to-be-dead on September 11 and continues with additional unforeseen and therefore unthwarted threats, *Zero Dark Thirty* takes seriously the commitment with which CIA personnel pursue their mission.

However, that does not mean that the film leaves unquestioned the measures themselves. When Wright confronts the National Security Adviser about the difficulty in refining information about the Abbottabad compound since the White House terminated the detainee program, the adviser directs him to figure out another way...and he does, suggesting that it is possible, even under time constraints and for a mission as significant as getting to bin Laden, to secure actionable intelligence through means other than torture. In the final scene, with Maya successful in her all-consuming obsession to find and kill bin Laden but reduced only to ambiguous tears as she contemplates what happens next, the toll that her task has taken is unclearly redeemed. Against the background of the semblance

of an American flag, enabling viewers to connect Maya's condition with that of the nation, she feels fully the weight both of having wanted the finality of finding bin Laden and of realizing that such finality stands for nothing more—neither the end of the War on Terror nor the satisfaction of recovering what has been lost in the effort (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012). Her reaction echoes both the relief evident in the real-world celebrations after bin Laden's death and the caution advised by President Obama that the fight is far from finished. Instead of narrative closure, an answer to the questions raised by the film's (and the historical moment's) beginning in terror and destruction, *Zero Dark Thirty* leaves the viewer with an incomplete sense of victory and an opportunity to wonder whether, in the end, it was all worth it.

CONCLUSION: NO END IN SIGHT

News media reported a myriad of reactions in the immediate wake of the news of Osama bin Laden's death. On Twitter and Facebook, humor, skepticism, and conspiracy theories dominated (Hitlin 2011). Formal responses from around the world depended upon individual national interests, ranging from Hamid Karzai's desire to see an end to fighting in Afghanistan to Benjamin Netanyahu's declaration of triumph for all who fight terrorism, but tended to reflect a sense that conflict involving terrorism would continue (Al Jazeera 2011; Epatko 2011; NPR Staff 2011). For the families and loved ones of the September 11 deceased, the event could have been seen as justice, resolution, a sense of a "mission accomplished," a restoration of safety, closure, a re-opening of old wounds, or something tangential to the intimate grief they have endured over the years (Greene 2011; Salahi 2011). *Psychology Today* even posted online reflections on whether or not his death could bring closure for Americans generally (Formica 2011; Sommers 2011). For Robert O'Neill, a former member of Navy SEAL Team Six who claims to have shot and killed bin Laden, "He...died afraid, and he knew we were there to kill him. And that's closure" (qtd. in Spargo 2014). Clearly, what bin Laden's death might ultimately mean remains subject to the needs, investments, and perspectives of whoever is asked.

Yet, the common thread through all of the known history of the War on Terror in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as well as its portrayal in *Zero Dark Thirty*, is the sense that even though a stated goal—finding and capturing or killing Osama bin Laden—was achieved, there is more

to do or to resolve in the aftermath of September 11. As noted earlier, both in this chapter and that on popular press oral histories, the plight of those who directly experienced the attacks established a looming horror that, as *The Falling Man* and *Zero Dark Thirty* evoke in different ways, has persisted through time. Like all of the fictional works discussed here, *Zero Dark Thirty* summons a murky world in which vital clarity is lacking in the face of imminent, substantial threat and in which complicated heroism or even anti-heroes serve as our only recourse. Yet, unlike those fictional works, *Zero Dark Thirty* purports to directly depict real life by basing its narrative on the accounts of those who actually authorized and/or performed some of the most troubling actions comprising the War on Terror. Together, these texts foreground the possibility that cultural assumptions about subjectivity, agency, and responsibility shattered on September 11 have been recalibrated to accommodate as ordinary and acknowledged the cultural norms of perpetual unease and uncertainty, the constrained choice of no-win scenarios, and equivocal ethics—a far cry indeed from the ideals of optimism, self-determination, and a just world celebrated by traditionally dominant US cultural narratives, particularly that of the American Dream. By doing so, each text invites its readers and viewers, who are situated in the real world, to confront what has been happening in the haze of exigency around them all along and to determine whether it is something they can accept in the cold light of day.

NOTES

1. The film begins with framing text that states, “The following motion picture is based on first hand accounts of actual events” (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012), invoking the authority that such accounts accrue (as discussed in the first chapter on oral history), yet also—upon more careful consideration, especially given debates about this film—the limited scope and reliability that any first-hand account’s individual perspective can actually provide.
2. This project focuses primarily on the features of September 11 that fostered fertile ground within which the War on Terror could develop by attending to texts that point to September 11 as originating their narrative actions and concerns. For this reason, I do not dwell here in greater depth or detail on the extensive work specifically and more comprehensively addressing the War on Terror, as such, in all of its complexity, throughout popular cul-

- ture, including film and television. Such studies include Kellner (2003, 2004, 2010), Markert (2011), McSweeney (2014), Pollard (2011), Prince (2009), and Westwell (2006, 2014).
3. Marita Sturken (2015) describes the display of a brick from bin Laden's Abbottabad compound in the National September 11 Memorial & Museum as an attempt to provide "a narrative end" to the events recounted and commemorated in that setting (473). She points out that *Zero Dark Thirty* provided a way through which museum visitors would have imagined bin Laden's death, as well as the primary way that "Maya's" role in the pursuit of bin Laden has come to be known at all (474). She notes these observations in the context of a larger assessment of the September 11 Memorial & Museum as ultimately as much of an unfinished project as the real-world events that it engages. In this way, Sturken articulates links similar to those I make here between this film, history, and the elusive possibility of genuine narrative closure around September 11.
 4. Cultural studies theorist Thomas Riegler argued in the fall of 2011 that, as of that time, film and television historicizing September 11 primarily featured recuperations of loss, heroism, and patriotism, which would accomplish the kind of narrative closure of putting the past in the past that Koch articulates. In contrast, as I have written here, film and television with plots and settings seemingly utterly unrelated to that day actually proved fully preoccupied with the notion that some aspects of September 11 might in fact be irrecoverable, echoing the other narrative approach that Koch describes.
 5. Some of the voice recordings also came from the hijacked airplanes, and at least one, that of Brad Fetchet, came from a recording on his parents' phone, not from a call to emergency personnel. The recording was used as testimony before the 9/11 Commission as well as in broadcast television news coverage, but the family says they did not permit the filmmakers to use it. They and others objected to the film's use of their loved ones' last words (Doane 2013).
 6. Interestingly, *Entertainment Weekly* reported that communications released to the press among CIA and Pentagon officials, and *Zero Dark Thirty* filmmakers seemed to indicate that, rather than any political agenda, enthusiasm for Bigelow and Boal's

previous film, *The Hurt Locker*, and appreciation for their support of military families' charities helped fuel these government agencies' willingness to contribute material to *Zero Dark Thirty* (Breznican 2012). The lawyers for Guantanamo Bay detainee Ammar al-Baluchi have argued that the CIA provided more access to evidence to Bigelow and Boal than to them (Rosenberg 2016).

7. As G. Roger Denson (2014) argues in *The Huffington Post*, the filmmakers' perspective was constrained, as was the general public's, by conflicting depictions of the role of torture in the search for bin Laden among government agencies and policy makers. The fact that CIA sources provided particular insights into the process raises the likelihood that the agency's view of the search would weigh more heavily in the film.
8. The acting CIA director at the time of the film's release, Michael Morell (2012), felt compelled to send a statement to CIA employees to put the film "into some context." First, he explained that "a very large team," rather than "a few individuals," participated in the search for bin Laden. Second, he contested the portrayal of the effectiveness of "enhanced interrogation techniques," although with some equivocation—he wrote, "whether enhanced interrogation techniques were the only timely and effective way to obtain information from those detainees, as the film suggests, is a matter of debate that cannot and never will be definitively resolved." Such language almost precisely matches that of former CIA Director Leon Panetta in an earlier letter to Senator John McCain (Powers 2013, 304). Third, he expressed concern about how specific CIA personnel were depicted (Morell 2012).
9. Graham Allison (2013), a former assistant secretary of Defense and director of Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, cited this same concern for the same reason, referencing *JFK*'s effect on ill-informed viewers who did not seek clarification about the assassination through more credible sources. He too corrected what he saw as the "glaring holes in the story" of *Zero Dark Thirty*.
10. On the other hand, Steve Coll (2013), also an expert on bin Laden, explicitly concludes elsewhere that the film "performed no public service by enlarging the acceptability of that form [that admits the possibility that torture *could* be a valid practice] of debate."

11. Following the 2014 Senate report on the CIA's detainee program and Edward Snowden's release of classified documents, the identity of at least one analyst—if not *the* analyst—on which Maya was based became a public issue. While most media outlets declined to identify her by name, she is described as having participated directly in the interrogation of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, among others, as well as having arranged the rendition of a completely innocent German citizen and having strenuously defended the detainee interrogation program. She also supported a subordinate who refused to share with the FBI concerns about two men in the United States who ended up becoming September 11 hijackers (Cole 2014). This real-life insight into the career of a CIA analyst helps to further contextualize the motivations and abilities of the “Maya” on-screen, which are discussed in a later section.
12. Early on, Dan tells Maya that Ammar is never getting out (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012).
13. Later in the film, Maya reproduces one of the verbal tactics Dan has used with Ammar when she is directly questioning another detainee, Hassan Ghul (Homayoun Ershadi), by telling him that she knows him, has been studying him, has been following him, and has let him live (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012).
14. Over time, Maya's motivation becomes increasingly tied to a desire for retribution that moves her even further away from ethical considerations. For example, Maya speaks more than once about personally wanting bin Laden dead (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012).
15. When eating with Dan and Maya, Ammar tells them that bin Laden had sent him and other fighters a message, which said, “Continue the jihad. The work will go on for a hundred years” (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012). This communication underscores for them their adversary's tenacity and what combating it might require.

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Conclusion: Cultural Trauma—September 11, 2001, and Beyond

I begin to conclude by selecting quotes from each chapter of this project that summon the haunting and foreboding corona of September 11, 2001:

“Either way, I would have been dead” (Kravette 2002, 45).

“These were the days after and now the years” (DeLillo 2007, 230).

“But if we can’t live together—we’re gonna die alone” (“White Rabbit” October 20, 2004).

“Nothing to do with all your strength” (*The Dark Knight* 2008).

“How do you evaluate the risk of *not* doing something, the risk of potentially letting bin Laden slip through your fingers” (*Zero Dark Thirty* 2012)?

Collectively, these quotes conjure a grim aura of preoccupation with inescapable death; persistent existential unsettlement; the visceral relevance of community support; the realization that all power, no matter how great, has its limits; and the ominous intuition that greater harms might still await. While researching and writing this book, it was perhaps unsurprising that I found in the popular culture all around me traces of the themes and concerns that resonated with those of the texts in which I was immersed. Yet friends would also approach me with similar observations, asking if I had yet seen *The Dark Knight*, or telling me they were thinking of me while watching the 2009 *Star Trek* film with its focus on the no-win training scenario of the Kobayashi Maru. Looking back on only the television of the twenty-first century so far, no-win scenarios and anti-heroes abound, in *Dexter*, *Breaking Bad*, *Hell on Wheels*, and *Game*

of *Thrones*, to name just a few from across networks and genres. I remember being particularly struck by the simultaneous prison killings ordered by *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White (Bryan Cranston), with simultaneity an acknowledged Al-Qaeda-esque *modus operandi*, communicated to DEA agent (and White's primary rival within law enforcement) Hank Schrader (Dean Norris) while he was speaking at a press conference at a school ("Gliding Over All" September 2, 2012). When a student asked me in the fall of 2013 whether so much dark entertainment could be related to September 11, I had to say, "Yes, I think it is."

Many on site and, importantly, millions of television viewers witnessed the events constituting September 11, prominently including the standing but damaged World Trade Center towers that endured just long enough for viewers to have hope for those trapped inside, only to see the jumping victims and the falling towers belie and extinguish that hope. These witnesses did not just learn about a completed horror after it had happened; they watched it unfold. Similar to those who have encountered other ordeals, witnesses of September 11 confronted the fragile artifice that sustains presumptions of their own longevity. Culturally, though, the fundamental assumptions that September 11 controverted operated on multiple registers. Not only did trust about one's personal safety falter, but also faith in the national security protections of the world's lone superpower and, even more fundamentally, belief that safety and security might even be possible in a world that appears to newly feature unpredictable, and therefore unavoidable, yet catastrophic threats.

Regardless of what those in positions of political, military, or intelligence authority might or might not have known about the possibilities for a domestic terrorist incident or understood about its root causes, ultimately the victims, survivors, and witnesses most immediately affected by these coordinated attacks—like the victims, survivors, and witnesses of other crises—never anticipated what would befall them that day and shape their subsequent life trajectories. As events at the World Trade Center developed on live television, an unprecedented viewing audience watched confounding developments lead to thousands dying or just barely evading death. Although most of these deaths and narrow escapes occurred invisibly within the airplanes, the Pentagon, the North and South Towers, and the dense debris cloud following those two buildings' collapse, witnesses both on site in Lower Manhattan and for a time through the media would see one person after another jump to sure death on the streets below

when conditions within the burning towers became untenable. Media audiences would also hear recordings or read transcripts of the last messages of trapped plane travelers or office workers left on their loved ones' telephone answering machines. They would also come to learn, through the cases of United Flight 93 and the hundreds of emergency responder casualties, that heroism is potentially both demanded of everyone and a posture with a costly price.¹ By the end of the day, witnesses would have confronted relentless illustrations of unforeseeable and seemingly arbitrary fate under circumstances of the highest stakes: marking the difference between life and death.

While public policy-makers determined and framed formal, institutional responses to this barrage, with the Bush administration terming its approach a "War on Terror," what was the broader cultural impact of this kind of mass witnessing? What were the dominant implicit concerns, the structures of feeling, for an American public without whose support, or at least acquiescence, these more formal, institutional responses would have been less likely to emerge and be implemented? September 11 provoked among many Americans anxious attempts to reconcile themselves to the fact of living in a dangerous world—for some, a new experience; for others, a compounding of existing vulnerabilities. The assumptions explored here about security and individual choice might not always be validated by reality. They also might not be taken for granted outside of the United States or within persistently unprotected American populations. Nevertheless, they shape a sufficiently consistent set of longstanding expectations to qualify as the implicit presumptions underlying dominant views of everyday American experience. Indeed, the very fact that a crisis could notably invalidate these presumptions underscores both their existence and their always provisional reflection of reality. After the horrors showcased on September 11, it becomes almost predictable what people might be ready to do or to accept, or at least to consider, when they sense viscerally that radical and unpredictable threats abound at the same time that they feel equally viscerally that past presumptions about expected behavior and appropriate action in the world no longer apply.

Throughout this project I have drawn on a cultural studies understanding of popular culture as a site of struggle (Hall 1981, 237), where "cultural forms...[can be] deeply contradictory" (233) as their signs and their significations prove fluid and dynamic (237–238). Popular press oral history collections, novels, television series, and films participate in the domi-

nant discourses of their conditions of production—namely, tendencies to reinforce prevailing beliefs and values and recuperate hegemonic stability by seeking to recover, however ambivalently and incompletely, notions of national community (popular press oral histories), individualism (Junod 2003), democratic values and civic justice (*Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *FlashForward*, and *The Dark Knight*), and an American success story through hard work and determination (*Zero Dark Thirty*). However, they are not, as Hall (1981) advises, “purely manipulative...because...there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a recreation of recognisable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding” (233). As I have demonstrated through my approach of cultural narrative criticism, each of these texts has also pointed to how September 11 challenged mainstream American beliefs. Importantly, then, which a phenomenological mode highlights (Carroll et al. 2000), readers and viewers can interact with these texts as if they offered something familiar while also, in the process of consumption, occasioning something new.

Since this project functions as a case study, much more work can be done to flesh out September 11 as a cultural trauma, including examining how the notion of cultural trauma might manifest within the particular circumstances and common belief systems of groups who are alienated from the dominant culture. Such groups would likely not seamlessly share the same kind of experience of shattered fundamental assumptions examined here—but would likely have their own specific experiences in accord with the terms of their own prevailing cultural formations. For example, while Americans who themselves might already be racially targeted could have been positioned for a more nuanced response to September 11 (Mukherjee 2003, 33–46), when shortly after the hijackings, violence rapidly arose against Arabs and Muslims, aggressors were sometimes themselves people of color (31–33). Additionally, generational studies could explore whether and how growing up during this era has mattered to how children, who at the time I am writing are now late teens and young adults, understand the world, its risks, and their ability to feel at home (subjectively, actively, and ethically) within it. Such directions tentatively suggest the potential depth and breadth of the cultural aftereffects of September 11.

This book has refined a theory of cultural trauma through a popular culture case study that helps contextualize how narratives within popular press oral history collections, literature, television, and film have confronted September 11, 2001, in the first decade of the twenty-first

century. Performing a close reading of popular culture texts to investigate the effects of other instances of large-scale, large-scope cultural change, this study suggests a possible way to understand cultural trauma by first delineating a precipitating event, then looking to narrative representation as a mode of foregrounding and negotiating the features and aftereffects of the initiating crisis that disrupt a community's culturally situated, foundational beliefs and values. I argue that popular culture forms provide sites for engaging cultural trauma by instantiating and spurring the recalibration and rehabilitation of thwarted expectations in the aftermath of meaning disruption. Assessing what expectations have been thwarted and whether they are restored or revised can offer enhanced clarity about a cultural group's interests, inclinations, and investments, fertile ground for identifying and generating support or resistance for future action. Additionally, and interestingly, September 11 coincided with other major social, political, economic, and technological changes creating less acutely spectacular, but nonetheless significant, upheavals at the turn of the millennium.² Clearly, the 2016 presidential election, with Donald Trump garnering impassioned support and equally impassioned resistance, seems to manifest readily the polarized sides within the early twenty-first century's ideological tug-of-war over just such swift and profound transformations.

This approach could be useful for other historical circumstances and instances of cultural trauma. Early modern European confrontations with the revelation that the Earth revolves around the sun present one possibility, but as a relatively more recent, US example, the Civil War provoked stark changes for a variety of cultural groups, most significantly in the South among both former slaveholders and former slaves. Although Ron Eyerman (2002) has explored slavery and the formation of African-American identity in terms of his formulation of cultural trauma, what else might be said, particularly of post-slavery residue such as Confederate flags and soldier monuments still permeating cultural representations of the "South," as well as slavery's tenacious legacy in contemporary race relations? What can be understood about the significations of the "South" and the United States as a whole through ongoing struggles to recalibrate or rehabilitate fundamental assumptions about life in a slaveholding society shattered over a century-and-a-half ago? As Jessica Stern (2010) painfully and painstakingly has contemplated, trauma can be endured as well as perpetuated by the same persons, and when a traumatizing event can happen to anyone—or disruptive things

can happen to “bad” people, as it were—the question would remain: with what effects? Extrapolating from this example to envision other potential directions, what could narrative and popular culture evoke about the meaning for any cultural group whose role in victimization—either as victimizer or victimized—contradicts deeply and dearly held foundations for communal identities and practices? Michael Rothberg (2014) has written about “implicated subjects,” those who occupy complex positionings of “perpetrator and victim,” belying the presumably simple distinctions between the two categories. Instead, some might be “neither perpetrator nor victim, though potentially either or both at other moments” (xv). Considering what happens when central, foundational cultural beliefs and values are starkly violated—even beliefs and values that are ethically problematic and might warrant dissolution—poses important questions about how to navigate a contemporary world of rapidly shifting cultural norms and expectations.

In regard to September 11, I have argued here that this profound dilemma of the no-win scenario, of facing only “bad” or “wrong” choices, persists as an unresolved anomaly within cultural formations of what individuals can know about and do in their world. From this juncture of trauma, culture, and September 11, my project has asserted that cultural trauma, characterizing survivors and witnesses born of fearful, helplessness-inducing threats, provides a volatile and dubious terrain from which to draw clear and constructive social and political responses—but, by recognizing the contours of this terrain, constructive social and political responses better attuned to the complexities that exigency creates might be possible. However, I want to suggest that, as Ernest Becker (1973) and Daniel Liechty (2002) and terror management theory, even Berger and Luckmann, and to some extent also DeLillo, have claimed, death, and the fear and denial of death, comprise a common human experience, however singularly felt, and constitute a shared human condition.³ It is this condition that underlies the horrific knowledge and power of trauma, generating despair as well as resistance to those who embody this world-shattering horror, which can take the form of extreme and violent responses. And yet, there is also the potential for mutuality through acknowledgment of this particular shared, inescapable vulnerability. Trauma exposes survivors and witnesses to the contingencies of human fate, which could produce, rather than resistant fear, compassionate engagement in hope with the vulnerable Other, who is also yourself.

NOTES

1. Recalling changes to daily life, routines, and expectations, Gauthier (2015) points to an altered relationship between people and buildings as a symptom of post-September 11 “communal trauma” (219).
2. Gray (2011) notes the historic, transformative transitions in US culture during this time (21–24).
3. Giesen (2004) writes, “The fundamental certainty about our being born and our being destined to die contrasts strikingly with the inaccessibility of these events for ourselves.” In other words, we know these distinctly intimate ordeals only by watching others go through them, so that communal experience—at least regarding death—always precedes individual experience, and trauma occasions a brush with what was almost real for one’s self (8).

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